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The Works of Leonard Merrick

CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH

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The Works of

LEONARD MERRICK

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WHEN LOVE FLIES OUT O' THE WINDOW. With an Introduction by Sir William Robertson Nicoll.

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WHILE PARIS LAUGHED: Being Pranks and Passions of the Poet Tricotrin.

NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH

By LEONARD MERRICK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
SIR JAMES M. BARRIE

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

A DISQUIETING sentimental journey would be doing down the obituary column of *The Times* in search of the novel-readers who have gone and died without ever knowing of the sentimental quest of Conrad. They would be the great majority, it seems, and we may drop a sigh for them or a "Serve you right," according to their opportunities. Incomplete lives.

It is from such reflections by a number of Mr. Merrick's fellow-writers that this edition of his books has sprung, of which *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* is the first volume. Disagreeing among themselves on most matters, probably even on the value of each other to the State, they are agreed on this, that Mr. Merrick is one of the flowers of their calling; and they have, perhaps, an uneasy feeling that if the public will not take his works to their hearts there must be something wrong with the popularity of their own. "Unless you like Merrick also, please not to like me." Or we may put it more benignantly in this way, that as you, the gentle reader, have been good to us, we want to be good to you, and

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so we present to you, with our compliments, just about the best thing we have got—an edition of Mr. Merrick's novels. There have been many "author's editions," but never, so far as I know, one quite like this, in which the "author" is not the writer himself but his contemporaries, who have entirely "engineered" the edition themselves and have fallen over each other, so to speak, in this desire to join in the honour of writing the prefaces. Such is the unique esteem in which Mr. Merrick is held by his fellow-workers. For long he has been the novelists' novelist, and we give you again the chance to share him with us; you have been slow to take the previous chances, and you may turn away again, but in any case he will still remain our man.

I speak, of course, only for myself, but there is no doubt to my mind that *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* is the best sentimental journey that has been written in this country since the publication of the other one; so gay it is, so sad, of such an alluring spirit, so firm a temper, I know no novel by any living Englishman except a score or so of Mr. Hardy's, that I would rather have written. I am not certain, however, that had the attractive choice been given me I would not first have "knocked off" some of Mr. Merrick's short stories—particularly the Parisian ones of which

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Mr. Locke will have something to say—to make sure of my fortune in case a street accident, say, should end me abruptly. In some of the other books the women, at least, are more elaborately drawn, and there is a genuine contact with life—Mr. Merrick with his coat off—but if, like the shipwrecked lady in a horrible tale, I were given a moment to decide which of my children I should save, I would on the whole keep grip of Conrad and the short stories and let the other babies go. Several other authors would, I am sure, see to it that while they themselves floated, *Cynthia* did not sink, and I can picture Mr. Howells diving recklessly after *The Actor-Manager*.

Of my free will nothing would induce me to give away the story of *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* to those who are about to read it for the first time. I have just re-read it, and it is as fresh as yesterday's shower; time, I am sure, is not going to dim it; it does so effectually what we should all have liked to try to do with it had we wakened some glad morn with the idea, that no one need ever seek to do it again. We must all henceforth try something else. And yet it has been in existence for many years and comparatively few people know of it. The libraries might issue it to the readers of six a week as fresh from the press, with a fair chance of not being

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found out. The same might be said of Mr. Hudson's *The Purple Land,* another of the choicest things of our latter-day literature. Yet the public does not back away from all good things even when the maker is alive; what makes it so shy of these?

I have heard Mr. Merrick called a pessimist, and readers are not prepared, as a rule, to spend joyous hours with pessimists. But compared to many of his contemporaries he is quite a gay dog, laughter shining constantly in his pages and a fine serenity; instead of setting forth to make his characters miserable he is so much in sympathy with them that I can think of no novelist who spends more time—it is almost divertingly obvious—in seeking a happy way out for them. It is as if he were fighting for some comfort for himself, as no doubt he is. He is not always successful, the stern artist in him forbidding, but never were characters who, if they go hopelessly wrong, have brought it more certainly on themselves. The author is ever nudging them in the right direction, and never gives up hope until the end. This must be one reason why his people are so curiously alive.

There is no such thing as a plot in his books.

"In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot,"

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and, indeed, he is a writer of comedies always, tho' tragedy lurks at all the corners. He has not found plot in life, and so it cannot come into his books; if he introduced it he would certainly be blown up by it. But there is no one with a greater art of telling a story, if that art consists in making us for ever wonder what we are to find on the next page. There are a hundred surprises in *Conrad*. Even when you have travelled with him far and know precisely in what circumstances he is next to be placed, shut the book and ask yourself what is to happen and you will find you don't know in the least; twenty lines from the close you have no idea how the story is to end. This is the aim—perhaps the sole aim—of the sensational writer, but he is satisfied if he has tricked us, and we lay his tale aside, smiling at the clever trick which is no trick as soon as he shows his hand. In the story of character such as Conrad, there is an absence of all cheap guile; the end is merely foreseen by the author, and not by us, because he knows his people better than we do. When we come to the end we must feel that there was no other, that he has merely discovered the truth. Nothing is quite so fascinating, in novel-reading, as trying, as it were, to make up on an author who keeps one step in front in this way; and it doubtless

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accounts for the lady who accepted the hand of a publisher on condition that he told her, as a wedding gift, how a certain tale, then running in his magazine, was to end. Very likely this is how all publishers get married.

There is, however, one way in which Mr. Merrick is such a failure that the very meanest of us can point the finger of scorn at him. If he has a mission it is to warn us against authorship and the tawdry glamour of the stage. Could he gather all young men and maids around him he would tell them not to be authors, and if they must be authors, not to seek their characters among those who follow that bitter profession; as for the stage, he knows the seamy side of it as it never has been known to any other novelist, and he casts the light of pitiless day on it and stabs it and "wriggles his knife in the wound"; there can be no glamour in the stage for you after you have read the books of Mr. Merrick. Obviously he hopes so, and you are a dullard indeed, if, after a dose of him, you do not see that the game is up, that you should burn your pen and avoid the stage-door for ever more. But after you have all fled the two damned callings, I see one figure stealing back to them, raging at them, but faithful to them to

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the end, loving the one as his life's work and wrapt hopelessly in the glamour of the other. Mr. Merrick is fighting his temperament in all his books and it always wins.

J. M. Barrie.

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CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH

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CHAPTER I

"How we laughed as we laboured together!
How well I remember, to-day,
Our 'outings' in midsummer weather,
Our winter delights at the play!
We were not over-nice in our dinners;
Our 'rooms' were up rickety stairs;
But if hope be the wealth of beginners,
By Jove, we were all millionaires!
Our incomes were very uncertain,
Our prospects were equally vague;
Yet the persons I pity who know not the city,
The beautiful city of Prague!"

If you can imagine the lonely shade of the man who wrote that verse returning to Literary London—where there is no longer a young man who could write it, and merely a few grey-beards are left still to understand what it means—I say, if you can imagine this, you may appreciate the condition of Conrad when he went back to the quartier Latin.

Conrad was no less sad, his disappointment was no less bitter, the society that he had sought so eagerly was no less alien to him. But while

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he commanded bocks for all, and mourned the change that left him desolate, the melancholy of his mood was a subtler thing—for he realised that the profoundest change was in himself.

Something should be said of the longings that had brought him back to the Quarter—longings in one hour tender, and in the next tempestuous —something hinted of the regretful years during which his limbs reposed in an official chair while his mind flew out of the official window to places across the sea where he had been young, and sanguine, and infinitely glad. To a score of places it flew, but to none perhaps so often as Paris, where he had studied art in the days when he meant to move the world.

Of course the trouble with the man was that he wanted to be nineteen again, and didn't recognise it. We do not immediately recognise that our youth is going from us; it recedes stealthily, like our hair. For a long time he had missed the zest, the sparkle, the buoyancy from life, but for the flatness that distressed him he blamed the Colony instead of his age. He confused the emotions of his youth with the scenes where he had felt them, and yearned to make sentimental journeys, fancying that to revisit the scenes would be to recover the emotions.

Because the office rewarded his mental flights

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ungenerously he was restrained by one of those little realities which vulgar novelists observe and which are so out of place in novels—"sordid" considerations, like ways and means. Give us lots of Blood, and the dummy over the dashing highwayman's shoulder! If you call him a "cavalier" it's Breezy Romance.

And then his Aunt Tryphena died, and left him everything.

At once he was lord of himself. Liberated by "everything," he sailed for Home, and savouring the knowledge that he was free to rove where he listed, lingered in London. Some months afterwards—when the crocuses were perking behind the Park rails, and Piccadilly was abloom with the first millinery of spring—he travelled to Dover, en route for the Past.

And lilac was everywhere—Paris was all lilac and sunshine. He drove to an hotel on the left bank. To behold it again! The grotesque clock under the glass shade, and the clothes pegs that were too large to hang clothes on, the scarlet édredon that he would throw on the floor before he got into bed, the sight of these things was sweet to him as the welcome of a woman is sweet after a passage made on a slow steamer to reach her side.

He said to the femme de chambre—she was

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elderly and she was plain; pretty chambermaids are all employed in farcical comedies; but she was a femme de chambre, and he felt communicative. He said, "La dernière fois que j'étais à Paris, j'étais un gamin." She smiled and gave a shrug: "Monsieur n'est qu'un enfant aujourd'hui." What English servant would have earned that tip? . . . Oh, yes! English servants are all too truthful.

When he had scattered his things about the room, he strode out to seek the little restaurant where the dinners had been so good, and the company had been so witty years before. Well, it had vanished. Perhaps he wasn't surprised, but he loitered wistfully in the street from which the faded sign had gone, and at the flashy establishment where he dined instead, the plats lacked flavour.

By-and-by he sauntered along the Boul' Mich'. While he walked he perceived that he had ceased to look about him, and was again looking back. The sigh of names that had been long forgotten was in the plaintive night, and the air was thick with echoes. He moved along the lamp-lit boulevard seeing ghosts, and to the right and left the heedless faces of the fleshly crowd were strange to him. All strange to him. This was the first impediment in his road.

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"Gay Paree" is gayest in the doggerel of the English music-halls; its gaiety is declining fast, but its beauty is fadeless. No city goes to bed more worldly, and wakes up looking more innocent. At six o'clock next day, when they began to beat carpets, and Conrad flung the windows wide, some of the happiness of the wakened capital's simplicity was breathed into his heart. And his fervour, and his purse, overcame the first impediment. Within a week of his arrival he had already been called "Mon cher."

He was called "Mon cher," and other things. He puffed his Caporal at the Café Vachette, and found that he had lost his relish for French tobacco; he sat among the cards and the dominoes at the Café d'Harcourt—bought carnations and écrevisses from the pedlars' baskets for Germaine and Suzanne; and Germaine and Suzanne proved witless compared with what their mothers had been, and he noted—not without some slight pride, for we are all patriotic abroad—that though the art of tying a veil had been granted to French women, the pretty features had been granted to the English.

It was now that the disappointment fell, now that he cried:—

"'Oh for one hour of youthful joy!
Give back my twentieth spring!'"

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The ardour of the students left him chilly, the rodomontades of his compatriots sounded merely stupid. They were all going to sacrifice themselves for an ideal, all going to England to paint persistently the class of work that England did not want. "No concessions" was their battle cry. Youth can never believe that it will live to make concessions. Your adept finds nowhere so scathing a critic as your novice.

O beautiful time when he, too, had imagined he was born with a mission! Bright morning when he had vapoured with the vainest! This afternoon the Rapsodie Anglaise was played to duller ears. The freaks seemed joyless, and he said the aspirations were "out of drawing." He was not sure that it was of immense importance whether one painted well, or ill—whether one painted at all. There were more useful things to be done in the world. He did not wish to do them harm, but he suggested that they were there. Then the audience hurled passages from the preface to "Mademoiselle de Maupin" at him —without acknowledgment—pelting him with the paragraphs full of shoes and potatoes until he was dizzy, and perhaps a little shaken. After all, when one has failed to pluck the grapes it is easy to proclaim that potatoes are more nourishing. On the whole he was scarcely a success in

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the Quarter—a success of curiosity at most—and he won no converts to a theory (advanced in one of the most serious of the cafés) that the greatest services to modern art were rendered by the writers of ladies' fashion articles.

"They are the Teachers who make the widest school," he urged. "Under their influence the fairest work of Nature takes an added loveliness —to them we owe the enticements of the tea-gown, the soul-compelling whisper of the silk petticoat. What other apostle of Beauty can hope to shed beauty in every home? Into how many homes do you suppose your ballades will go?" He was chatting to a poet. But the poet became diffuse.

Conrad returned to his hotel not wholly dissatisfied with the impression he had made upon the poet. At the corner of the rue des Ecoles he had one or two vigorous thoughts concerning the vanity of versification which he wished had occurred to him earlier, and when he had lit the lamp he began to write. You can know very little about him if you are surprised to be told that what he wrote was verse. It was of course a monody to his Boyhood.

As his age has not been stated, and he had begun to deplore it so much, it may be as well at

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this point to say that he was thirty-seven. A less venerable figure than you have pictured him, perhaps, despite the chambermaid. There were, however, hours when he felt a hundred.

He felt a hundred towards the close of his stay in Paris. He had resolved to go back to London, but it had few associations for him, and he packed his portmanteaux drearily. On the evening before he crossed, his thoughts flashed to a little English watering-place where he had spent a summer when he was still proud of wearing trousers. He recalled the moment of his invitation, the thrill of its unexpectedness. A nursery, and four children: three of them his cousins, departing for the seaside next day, in fancy already on the sands. And one of the trio had exclaimed—was it Ted who began it?—one of the trio had exclaimed: "Wouldn't it be jolly if Con could come too?" He was "Con." He was Con hanging over the banisters breathless five minutes later, for Nina, and 'Gina, and Ted had descended to the drawing-room tumultuously to prefer a petition to "Ma."

"Ma says there wouldn't be beds enough," they announced with long faces, mounting the stairs; and then he stammered that he had "expected there'd be something like that," and they danced round him in a ring, crying: "We made

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it up. You're to come with us if you may—you're to go home and ask!"

The nursery was very clear to him. He saw the gleeful group on the threshold again, and the bright pattern of the wall-paper. He could see the open window with the radiant sky across the roofs.

So they had all gone to the seaside together—he, and Nina, and 'Gina, and Ted, in charge of the governess; and the house had turned out to be a school called "Mowbray Lodge," but the boys were away. Jack, the dog, had been lost on the journey—and killed the schoolmaster's chickens when he was restored. The rows there used to be with the master! Mr. Boultbee—that was his name. There was a yellow field blazing with dandelions, Conrad remembered, and behind the shadow of the fir trees, apples swayed. He remembered the garden of Rose Villa next door, and the afternoon when Mary Page kissed her hand over the fence. Mary Page! On a sudden how close it was—all except her features—her hat trimmed with blue, and her dangling plaits, and the vibration of the time. Ted and he were enslaved by her equally—without bitterness—and used to show each other the love-letters she wrote to them both after they went home. And oh! how they longed to

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be back, and oh, the plans they made, which never fructified, for husbanding their pocket-money and taking her by surprise one brilliant morning!

"Qu'est-ce que vous m'offrez, monsieur? Payez-moi un bock, hein?"

"No," said Conrad, starting, "run along and play, there's a good child!" These memories had come to him at the Bal Bullier, and the band was banging, and the petticoats were whirling, and a young lady was asking to be refreshed.

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CHAPTER II

She pouted a protest at him, and whisked into the dance. He observed that she had graces, and heaved a sigh for the time when it would have been piquant to brush the pout away. To-night it would be tasteless. "Kissing a cocotte is like eating tinned salmon," said Conrad to himself regretfully, and went to the vestiaire for his overcoat.

The interruption had jarred him, but it was not till he had stepped over to the boulevard Saint-Michel that he knew that he had left the ball-room for the purpose of resuming his reverie undisturbed. In the wide gloom of the thoroughfare's wrong end, his interest in the projects of five-and-twenty years ago was again so keen that he grieved to think they had been fruitless. Improving on history, he permitted the boys who were boys no more to amass the sovereign that they coveted, and, giving his fancy rein, lived through the glorious day which had never dawned. He tried very hard to be fair to Ted after Mary had welcomed them, though to pre-

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vent the conversation becoming a dualogue irked him a good deal. In moments he discovered that he was talking to her rather well for his age, and then he corrected himself with loving artistry. But he could seldom find it in his heart to correct Mary, and she said the prettiest things in the world. He came back to the present, swimming with tenderness for the little maiden of his retrospect. It shocked him to reflect that she must be about thirty-eight if she lived still, and might even have a marriageable daughter. The pathos of the marriageable daughter indeed overwhelmed him. He had reached the Taverne du Panthéon, and taking a seat, he pictured himself waking to realise that he was only twelve years old and that all events subsequent to the epoch had been a dream.

The October air was bleak when he crossed on the morrow, and the deck rolled to meet the splashes of the waves. The idea of revisiting the watering-place—and the idea had germinated—attracted him less forcibly as his chair played see-saw with the taffrail, but he remembered that he had often been advised by advertisements "not to risk infection from foreigners, when he could winter in sunny Sweetbay, the fairest spot in England." The fact that it had a reputation as a winter resort encouraged him

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somewhat, and by the time he saw the lamps of Charing Cross he felt adventurous again. He also admired a girl on the platform. "There's nothing like an Englishwoman for beauty," he said; and the girl exclaimed: "Oh, I've left my little fur in my grip, right there!"

He fulfilled his programme the next morning. The drowsy station of Sweetbay seemed to him larger than of yore as he glanced about him, but he did not stop to gather information in the matter. His bag was in the fly, and he was rattled to an hotel where the manager appeared surprised to see him. Although his sensations on the boat had left him with no insistent longing for a room with a sea-view, he accepted one without complaint, and learning that luncheon was being served, descended to where three despondent-looking visitors were scattered along an acre of tables. Evidently people continued to go abroad in spite of the advice. However, he had not come to Sweetbay for society.

It was a neat and decorous little town awaiting him when he sallied forth from the hotel. Everything was very clean, very tidy. The pink-paved sidewalks, bordered by trees, glistened like coral; the snug villas, enclosed by euonymus hedges trimmed to precision, had a fresh and wholesome air, an air that made him

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think of honey soap and good rice puddings. He backed before the walls of the Parish Church. A play-bill of the Rosary Theatre, near by, seemed an anachronism, and even as he recalled Sweetbay, it had been content with Assembly Rooms. On a hoarding he saw a poster of the Pier Pavilion—the pavilion was an innovation too. In the High Street photographs of some popular actors had invaded a shop window, and he was struck by the extraordinary resemblance they bore to one another—all wearing on the brow the frown of intellectuality, and carefully disordered hair. The Town Hall was a landmark. He murmured Matthew Arnold's line: "Expressive merely of the impotence of the architect to express anything," but the unparalleled ugliness of the building warmed him with recollections. He branched to the left, as he used to branch to the left when he carried Mary's bathing shoes, and surrendering himself to sentiment unreservedly now swung joyously for Eden.

And from this point landmarks flocked thick and fast. The way began to climb the hill, the hill began to show the boughs, the boughs began to veil the road, the road began to woo the lane, the lane began to near the house, and—like the old woman's pig—Conrad got over the stile.

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And "Mowbray Lodge" was still painted on the gate! It was all so wonderfully the same for a moment in the shade behind the fir trees—so wonderfully—that he felt tearful. The scene had stood so still that there seemed something unreal in his returning here a man. Again he saw the slender columns of the long veranda, and the summer-house on which the weather-cock still perched. He looked, and looked wide-eyed, at a faded door—not green, not blue—and knew suddenly that behind that door there should be currant bushes and a tangle of nasturtium, and hens prinking on the path. His soul embraced the scene. And yet—and yet it was not the features that had lived in his mind that moved him most. The magic lay in the pervasive hush, and in a gust of the fir trees' smell, which he had forgotten until it swept him breathless across the years.

Yes, there seemed something unreal in his standing here a man. His spirit was listening—and he knew that it was listening—for calls from children who had grown to middle-age now; his gaze was waiting—even he knew that it was waiting—for the rush of childish figures which the scene should yield.

Presently he sought the space where they had played. But the Field of the Cloth of Gold was

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transformed. Where the dandelions had spread their splendour for Mary he saw a market-garden, and the sun that had made a halo for Mary glittered on glass. There was a quantity of glass, there were consequential rows of it, all raising money for somebody, all reminding the pilgrim that meadows move with the times. "Well, I suppose it's progress," said Conrad, shaking his head. But he missed the dandelions. He was a Conservative by instinct, though he was a Liberal by reason.

When he loitered back to the view of Mowbray Lodge, a lady of the age which the French call "certain" had come out on the veranda. She had a little shawl over her shoulders, and in her hand she held a pair of scissors with which she was clipping a palm. The placid gaze she lifted to him was not discouraging, and advancing towards her with a bow he said:—

"Pray forgive me for troubling you, but may I ask if Mr. Boultbee lives here now?"

"N—no," answered the lady pensively, "no gentleman lives here. 'Mr. Boultbee'? I'm afraid I don't know the name. Are you sure he is still living in the town?"

"I am sure of nothing," replied Conrad. "It is so long since my last visit that I am even doubtful if he is living at all."

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She seemed to reflect again and said: "Perhaps they might be able to tell you at the post-office."

"It really isn't important," he declared, "though I'm obliged by your suggestion. To confess the truth, I am more drawn to the garden than to Mr. Boultbee. Years ago I spent a summer here, and being in the neighbourhood again I couldn't resist the temptation to come and dream over the top rail of your gate."

"Oh—er—would you care to look round the place?" she murmured with a tentative wave of the scissors.

"I should be charmed," said Conrad, "if I am not intruding."

"Of course you don't see it to advantage now. Last month——" She moved across the lawn beside him, telling the falsehoods with which everybody who has a garden always dejects a visitor. He affected that thirst for knowledge with which everybody who is shown a garden always rewards a host.

"It's a long time since you were here, I think you said?" she remarked, pleased by his eagerness.

"It is," said Conrad, in his most Byronic manner, "just a quarter of a century." The lady looked startled, and he continued with a sigh,

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"Yes, I was then in that exquisitely happy period of life when we just begin to know that we are happy; you may imagine what memories are stirring in me:—

> " 'I can recall, nay, they are present still,
> Parts of myself, the perfume of my mind,
> Days that seem farther off than Homer's now
> Ere yet the child had loudened to the boy.' . . .

That poem—Lowell's 'The Cathedral'—flashed into my mind as I came upon your parish church awhile ago, and

> " 'gazed abashed,
> Child of an age that lectures, not creates,'

at its old honours. I quoted the best part of a stanza to myself in the street. I'm afraid that is a habit of mine."

"It must be very nice," said the lady apprehensively, "yes, indeed!"

It appeared that she was no more acquainted with Lowell than with Mr. Boultbee, so gliding to a subject which lay quite near his heart this afternoon he introduced a third name.

"When I was here last a Dr. Page occupied the villa across the fence," he went on. "He had a daughter. To be prolix, he had several daughters, but to me his family consisted of Miss Mary.

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We were engaged. I won't ask you if they are there still—something warns me that they are not—but can you, by any chance, give me news of them?"

"I am sorry I cannot," she returned, fluttering. "There has been no Dr. Page in Sweetbay—I am almost certain there has been no Dr. Page in Sweetbay since I settled here. I am positive there is none now—quite positive! There's Dr. Hunt, there's Dr. Tatham——" She recounted laboriously the names of all the medical men practising about the town, while he wondered what she was doing it for.

"I thank you heartily," he said, when she reached the end of the list.

The next moment it became evident that she, in her turn, had a question to put, for her glance was interrogating him already, and at last she faltered:—

"Pardon my asking you, but did I understand you to say that you were—h'm—engaged to the daughter of Dr. Page twenty-five years ago? Surely when you said you were a child then, it was no figure of speech?"

"No," answered Conrad; "but to be frank with you, it was nothing less than the thought of her that lured me back to-day. Let me admit that I wasn't quite ingenuous when I spoke

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of—of 'being' in the neighbourhood; I came deliberately, in fulfilment of a cherished plan. To me your garden is a tomb—if I may say so without depressing you—it is the tomb of the Used-to-be. We were both children, but there are some things that one never forgets:—

> "'I'm not a chicken; I have seen
> Full many a chill September,
> And though I was a youngster then,
> That girl I well remember.'

Holmes wrote 'gale,' not 'girl,' otherwise he might have been speaking for me."

"Such constancy is very beautiful," breathed the lady; "I thought——" She paused, slightly pink.

"But it was unfair," he assured her; "men can be quite as constant as women—especially to the women they never won."

"Er—perhaps you would like to see the house?" she inquired; "and you will allow me to offer you some tea before you go?"

"I accept both offers gratefully," said Conrad.

He followed her into the hall, and she conducted him, with little prefatory murmurs, to such of the apartments as a maiden lady might modestly display. Repapered and rearranged

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they looked quite strange to him, but the knowledge that he was in Mowbray Lodge averted boredom.

"You find them altered," she said, as they went back to the drawing-room.

"Improved," said he.

"And the town," she added; "no doubt you find the town improved too?"

"Altered," said Conrad, thinking of the market garden. "Well, it is certainly bigger."

"The rapid development of Sweetbay can astonish none who bear in mind its remarkable combination of climatic advantages, but the sylvan fairness of the town is not diminished, and it continues to present an unrivalled example of the 'rus in urbe,' " responded the lady with surprising fluency. "Do you take sugar and milk?"

"Ah—thank you," he said.

"Are you making a long stay among us, or——?"

"A very brief one. Indeed, I thought of returning to-morrow."

"Oh!" There was a tinge of disappointment in her "Oh." "I wondered if you meant to stop. If you had meant to pass the winter here—— But I daresay you would have preferred an hotel anyhow?"

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"I don't understand," he said, sipping. "What is it you were going to be good enough to suggest?"

"It occurred to me that, as the house has so many associations for you, you might have liked to take it for a short term. I am trying to let it furnished during the next few months, and I could leave the servants. My cook has been with me now——"

"You would let this house to me?" exclaimed Conrad, thrilling, and saw such splendid visions that for quite a minute he forgot to attend to her.

"If the rent is too high——?" She was regarding him nervously.

"Not at all," he cried, "not at all. I was simply lost in the effulgent prospect that you've opened to me."

"Really?"

"It was an inspiration. How kind of you to mention it."

She deprecated gratitude. "There would be no children, of course?" she said, her gaze dwelling among her china.

"Four," he answered promptly. "That is, the youngest must be about thirty-five now. I beg your pardon, but *I* have had an inspiration, too. I'm dazzled by the idea of peopling the house

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with the men and women who were children here five-and-twenty years ago; I dare swear my relatives have never set foot in Sweetbay since. We'll be comrades all over again—you know how Time loosens these childish ties—in the very place, in the very rooms, where we were such comrades then. Why, it's the most delightful plan that was ever hatched!" He hesitated. "I wonder if they'll come? How about the trains? One of my cousins would have to go up rather often, I expect."

"The railway company has combined with Mother Nature and a spirited Corporation to render Sweetbay attractive to the jaded Londoner. The service is fast and frequent, and well-appointed 'flys' may be chartered at most reasonable fares," replied his hostess without an instant's pause.

"How convenient!" said Conrad. "What more can he want?"

"If you think your friends may need persuasion, I should be pleased to present you with a copy of a little work of mine to send them. It describes all the attractions of the neighbourhood —and it's quite unlike the usual guide-book. It is thorough, but chatty. My aim has been to inform the visitor in a sprightly way."

"An authoress?" he said warmly.

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"Of one book only," she murmured, her face suffused by an unbecoming blush.

"But of many readers, I'll be bound! If obstacles arise then, it shall be your pen that conquers them. You overwhelm me with kindnesses. I really think, though, the address will be magnet enough for the friends I want. 'Mowbray Lodge, Sweetbay'—how they'll stare! 'Bring your spades and pails,' I shall write; 'come, and let us all be boys and girls again.' The girls have little girls and boys of their own now. No, don't be afraid of their smashing that soul-stirring Chelsea, my dear madam—I won't have them. That's the essence of the contract, the new generation must be left behind. There must be we four, and nobody else—the four who will find their childhood waiting for them here, just the four who can feel the enchantment of Mowbray Lodge. So it is settled?"

"As far as——" She smoothed her gown.

"Oh, naturally there must be references, and inventories, and all sorts of tiresome details—and with your permission we will get them over as soon as possible. I shall have the pleasure of writing to you to-morrow. To whom——"

"Miss Phipps," she intimated.

"And mine is 'Warrener.' Stay, I have a

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card. But, by the way, when did you propose to let me come in, Miss Phipps?"

"Would next month suit you?" she asked. "Perhaps you would prefer it to be early in the month?"

"I wouldn't disorder your arrangements for the world, yet I own that 'early' has a musical ring. It would be agreeable to arrive before the colder weather."

"There are places in England where winter's cold blasts seem never to penetrate, and where birds and flowers go on singing and blooming in defiance of the calendar," she rejoined.

"Really?" said Conrad. "Still——"

"And among such places," concluded the lady firmly, "Sweetbay is pre-eminent. . . . But you will let me give you another cup of tea?"

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CHAPTER III

He could not persuade himself that the invitations evoked enthusiasm, indeed two of them were declined at the beginning. Only Nina accepted at once. She wrote: "How on earth did you find Sweetbay again—is it still on the map? Yes, I will come—and with 'no encumbrances' —but I won't promise to be rural so long as all that. If I were you, I would arrange with the Stores for constant supplies. Can you depend on the cook?"

Regina was obviously indignant at the exclusion of her husband. She replied that her cousin's remembrance of their childhood was "quite touching." This was underlined. "But though I fully understand that Toto's presence would spoil your romantic plan, I cannot pretend to forget that I am now a wife, Conrad." Conrad was perturbed. He drove to Regent's Park and showed the letter to Nina, and she said that her sister couldn't forget she was a wife, because she had married a remote relation of Lord Polpero's.

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"They have stayed at the 'Abbey,' my dear; at least she tells me they have as often as she condescends to dine with us—Regent's Park is 'so far away' from their poky little place in Mayfair! She can just call it 'Mayfair' without getting a remonstrance from the postal authorities. An 'Abbey' has been too much for her. Of course Polpero is a pauper, and the Abbey's a wreck, but I believe she slept with the family-tree over her bed. It's about the only tree of Polpero's that the woodman has spared, but 'Gina feels Norman."

Conrad was still perturbed. He hastened to appease Regina, and moderating his desires, implored "Toto" to spare her to him just for a week or two. "Toto" said promptly that "a couple of months at Sweetbay was exactly what she needed for her cough." So she was won, and there remained only Ted to conquer.

As a young professional man with nothing to do, Ted had naturally been slow to answer the letter. Young professional men make a point of delaying a long time before they answer letters—it shows how busy they are. After they have plenty of work on hand they answer more quickly. When he wrote, he declared that the notion of renewing their boyish memories in such tranquil quarters appealed to him more forcibly

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than he could say, but he was "so terribly hard pressed that he feared he would get no change until he ran over to Monte Carlo at the end of the term." He was at the Bar, waiting for briefs.

Conrad called at his chambers, and bore him off to dinner. Ted was fortunately independent of his profession, and his immutable purpose was to convince people that it was wearing him to death. In the restaurant he bent over his melon a brow corrugated by the cares of imaginary suits; he frowned at his soup through a monocle as if he were perpending an Opinion. But it was a dinner of supreme excellence, and then they adjourned to the club. If it had not been Ted's club too, and socially undistinguished, Conrad might have aspired to greater favours now. Invite a man to a club for which he is ineligible himself, and he will remember you with kindliness no less often than he drawls, "A fellow was telling me in Brook's the other day——" Before they parted, Ted had consented quite cheerfully—for the later Ted—and all was well.

So the evening came when Conrad sat in Mowbray Lodge looking forward to the morrow and the arrival of the train due at twelve fifteen. And he looked forward with more eagerness because the evening, strange to say, was rather melancholy, and the knowledge that he was going to

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bed in a room where he had slept as a boy induced a mood totally different from the mood that he had expected of it. He did not feel a boy as he sat in the silent house, by a bad light, listening to the rain patter on the shrubs. On the contrary he felt increasingly old and increasingly mournful while the long evening wore away. The dreary lamps depressed him, and the sad tick of the clock, and the ceaseless dripping of the rain sent him to the whisky-bottle.

After breakfast next day he bought lamps—several of them—with duplex burners. The roads were a little sloppy, but the sky was blue. He was gratified to reflect that his cousins were doubtless blinking in a black fog; the permanent pleasure of wintering in the country is the thought of how unhappy our friends must be in town. In the forlornest watering-places of the south coast you may notice, on a fine November morning, people folding newspapers briskly and looking heavenward with a twinkle in their eyes. They are all returning thanks for the sufferings of their friends in London.

The train due at twelve fifteen wound into view at twelve thirty-five.

They were there! Nina, alert, a smile on her thin, shrewd face; Regina, with an air of having

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travelled under protest; Ted, bowed beneath the weight of the Law Courts.

"So you've come!"

"At last! What a loathsome line!"

"Who's looking after the luggage? Is there a cab to be had?"

"Well, of course. Do you suppose it's a village?"

"How hot it is! You must be smothered in those furs, dear?" This to Nina from 'Gina. 'Gina was always expensively clothed, and badly dressed, but she couldn't vie with the Regent's Park sables. "You must be half dead," she insisted compassionately; "it's as warm as the Riviera."

"We boast of it in our advertisements," said Conrad, "but it isn't. How did you leave Toto and the family?"

He heard that it was a fine day in town too, and secretly resented the fact. The party drove away, another fly rumbling with the baggage in their wake.

"The lane!" he exclaimed as he sprang out. "And it's the same as ever."

"I don't remember it a bit," said all three, gazing about them vaguely.

"The garden!" he displayed it in triumph.

"I fancied it was quite big," said Nina.

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"Funny how wee children's eyes exaggerate, isn't it?" But she had not really been so wee as all that.

"The hall, where Boultbee was always ragging us because we didn't wipe our shoes!" He had thrown the door open before the maid could run upstairs.

"Who was Boultbee?" asked Regina. "What a memory you have!"

They lunched; and they were blithe at luncheon; they discussed a divorce case in smart circles. Regina said hurriedly that there was "another side to the story." She knew no more about it than she had read in the papers, but she now moved on the confines of smart circles, and there are people who can never accustom themselves to advancement, pecuniary or social.

"Her husband is such a scamp," she explained, "such a scamp! I don't defend her, but there's so much that never came out in court. Dear Lady Marminger, her mother, was always against the match, she always felt it would be fatal. I recollect when we were staying at the Abbey once——" She was the most obnoxious variety of snob: the middle-class woman who has married into the fringe of society. If she had written novels, everybody in them who wasn't a duchess would have been a duke.

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"One of the cleverest things ever said in the divorce court," Ted began judicially, "was when Hollburn was cross-examining——"

"Oh, the scamp theory is worn out!" struck in Nina. "When a woman has married a scamp, her family feel provided with an excuse for everything odious she does all the rest of her life."

"Was when Hollburn was cross-examining——" He was not to be put off.

They were Nina, and 'Gina, and Ted, and Conrad welcomed them with both hands, but he caught himself thinking that for any influence the surroundings had upon the conversation he might as well have invited them to Princes'.

He took Ted to see the summer-house when luncheon was over—the summer-house in which they used to have their conferences when they were such chums—and Ted was a disappointment. The summer-house had withstood the years, but the chum had gone. He was affecting interest, and it hurt—it hurt horribly, because he was Ted and they were where they were. He was led to Rose Villa, where Mary Page had lived. The sound of its name had made their hearts ache once, and the same name was on the same gate-post, visible to the same eyes. He passed it by, telling casual falsehoods about the extent of the practice that he hadn't made, and

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when the post was pointed out, he murmured: "Oh, is it? By Jove!"—maintained a perfunctory pause for ten seconds, and broke it with, "Well, as I was saying——"

Afterwards they all sauntered to the esplanade, and Conrad owned to himself that it was no animated scene. But the sun shone bright, and when there is beautiful weather in Sweetbay it almost compensates for the absence of everything else there.

"Like spring," he observed; "isn't it? Probably there's a fog in town by now, or it's beginning to snow. We're all well out of it."

"Y-e-s," replied Nina. "You don't find it a little depressing seeing so many people in bath-chairs, do you?"

"'So many people?'" Regina was derisive. "I've only seen seven human beings since we arrived."

"Still, the seven were all in bath-chairs," said Nina.

"One expects to meet people in bath-chairs at the seaside," Conrad pleaded.

"But not sick people," she said, "here they are conscientious. It's a pretty little band-stand; what time does the band play?"

"It'll begin in June, I think," he answered.

"June?" cried Regina.

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"It's not the season," he pointed out. "Of course it's quiet just now."

"I don't wish to cavil," said Ted, with a forbearing smile, "but when you tell us it is not the season, I am struck by a slight discrepancy in your statements. A few minutes ago you told us it was a winter place."

"Well, so it is, but it's first of all an English place. You mustn't ask for bands to discourse in band-stands all the year round, my dear fellow—such things don't happen. . . . A 'town band' enlivens the streets once a week, I believe; I'm not an authority yet—I only came down yesterday morning, and I've been setting my house in order. There's a theatre," he added hopefully; "we might drop in to-night, if you like. I can't say what is going on there, but we'll ascertain."

They spied a framed play-bill in a confectioner's window on the way back, and stopped to examine it. Though the piece was familiar to them, and the names of the company were strange, they crowded before the play-bill cheerfully until they discovered that it bore an ancient date. The theatre, they learnt, was now closed, excepting for an "orchestral concert" every Thursday evening. This was Saturday.

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"We'll have a jolly evening at home," said Conrad.

"There isn't a billiard table, I suppose?" inquired Regina; "I'm an awful swell with the cue. I make them play every night at the Abbey when we're there. Polpero chaffs me about it immensely; he's one of the old school—sweet, but of the old school. It's such fun—I chaff him back. Toto *roars.*"

The inventory had not included a billiard table, but he remembered after dinner that he had seen a Pier "Pavilion" advertised, and his guests seemed encouraged when he mentioned it. Regina said it was fun to be bohemian sometimes.

The place looked less animated still when they sped forth to be "bohemian." Its aspect was no longer sedate, it was bereaved. The vacant High Street mourned behind its shutters. At the Quadrant a forsaken policeman kept a doleful eye on space.

"Everybody must be on the pier," said Conrad. "As soon as we turn the corner we shall see the lights."

Their feet sprung echoes in the stricken town as they pressed forward; and through the gloom that veiled a moaning sea, the pier became distinguishable. But no light was on it save the light of a misty moon, no gas-jet glimmered

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among the globes on either side. The pay-box was black and tenantless; the gates were locked. Against them leant a lonely board, announcing a "Refined Entertainment" for the twenty-second evening of the previous month. The desolation of the scene was tragic.

Their return was made in silence. And the first thing happened that recalled the days of their childhood here: they all went to bed early.

Nina wanted to know if she could be given another room, the next morning. She remarked that the slowest railways always made the most fuss, and that a train had been rehearsing outside her window half the night. "It rattled and snorted, and clashed and clanked till three o'clock." She acknowledged Conrad's regrets and assurances with a plaintive sigh, and shook her head feebly at her coffee cup.

It was raining. That it can rain in Sweetbay for a fortnight on end with no longer intervals than the entr'actes at a fashionable theatre is not distinctive; the idiocrasy of Sweetbay is that it recommences raining twenty times a day as if the deluge had been hoarded for a year—it rains as if the heavens had fallen out. Nina and 'Gina, who had ventured into the lane "between the showers," were drenched before they could

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gain shelter, and they were taciturn when they had changed their clothes.

The rain was still pelting when Ted went up to town on Monday, and a vicious wind lashed "sunny Sweetbay" when he came back. On Tuesday the ardour of the flood abated, but "the fairest spot in England" was sodden under a persevering drizzle, and a letter by the evening post made Regina nervous about the health of her baby. "Toto seemed a good deal worried," she said, "and she thought under the circumstances she ought to be at home." She departed on Wednesday in a cataract.

"Do you think she's good-looking?" asked Nina.

"She is not good-looking," said Conrad reflectively, "but she's so convinced that she is that she almost persuades you in moments."

"That's it," Nina assented; "she attitudinises as if she were a beauty. When they're shown photographs of her with her face bent, men are quite eager to know her. Of course the baby's bosh!"

"I'll confess that I'm not anxious about the baby myself, I'm afraid she found it rather slow here. I got *Punch* for her at the station, and a servant went round before breakfast to order a foot-warmer—it's necessary to give notice when

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you'll want a foot-warmer—but it was weak reparation. You were all very good to come."

"If there were anything to read in the house, I wouldn't mind so much," she said, "I mean I wouldn't mind the weather. If it ever leaves off, we might go and try to find 'a select library in connection with Mudie's.'"

"There are heaps of books in the house—I can lend you all the poets."

"I would rather have something to read," she said, "thanks. Do you think if we found one, it would be open oftener than once a week?"

"You mustn't misjudge the town by the theatre," he expostulated; "that the theatre only opens once a week is due to a combination of circumstances that I don't know anything about, but I am sanguine of the shops opening every day."

"How long are you saddled with the place for?" Her tone was sympathetic.

"I'm not sorry I took it," he answered. "Of course everything is more or less a disappointment except the unattainable. When Columbus reached the New World at last, the aborigines said, 'Well, what do you think of Amurrica?' He said, 'I thought it would be bigger.' A bird in the hand is not worth two in the bush; on the contrary, a lark in the sky is worth two in the

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pudding. If you ever scratched those pretty hands of yours getting a glow-worm out of a hedge, you know that, when you have brought it home, you wondered why you had given yourself so much inconvenience to acquire the little impostor. Possession strains—it depresseth her that gives, and him that takes. While it was in the hedge, the glow-worm shone no less divine than the poet's star."

"Where was that?"

"In a fable. Did you think I meant a star of the music-halls? They weren't the fashion in poetry yet. He was a glorious poet enchanted by a star of the heavens. He stretched his arms to it, he sang to it nightly. And for his sake the star 'stooped earthward, and beeame a woman.' And then the day came when the woman asked her lover which was best—'The Star's beam, or the Woman's breast':—

> "'I miss from heaven,' the man replied,
> 'A light that drew my spirit to it.'
> And to the man the woman sigh'd,
> 'I miss from earth a poet.'"

"M-m, that's rather sensible," admitted Nina, "I like that—I suppose it can't be really great poetry. What get on my nerves so in the poetry of the Really Great are those irritating words

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that I knew were coming, like 'porphyry' and 'empyrean,' and 'bower' and 'nymph'; and then there are the titles—they always sound so dull because I never know what they mean. Well, go on talking to me."

At eleven o'clock the downpour ceased, and presently a timid sunbeam played upon a puddle. They went out to look for a library at noon. There was no need for umbrellas.

The librarian was a listless juvenile of "superior manners." When she was not occupied among the literature, she assisted in the fancy department. While Nina was lingering at the shelves, three middle-aged gentlewomen came to the counter, and the first one said:—

"Good morning. I want a . . . book. Something—er—rather exciting."

The juvenile threw an omniscient glance at the collection, and plucked. The lady read the title aloud:—

"Is this rather exciting?"

"Oh, yes, madam, that is very exciting."

"Oh." She ruffled the pages irresolutely. "It's not very long," she complained; "haven't you anything longer?"

The juvenile plucked.

"Is *this* rather exciting?" asked the lady.

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She was assured that it was no less exciting than the other novel.

"Oh," she said . . . "'The Face in the Drawer.' Oh . . . I'll take this one then. You know the address, don't you? Good morning."

The requirement of the second matron was: "Something pretty . . . not too short . . . to last me through the week." Conrad almost expected to hear the librarian reply that they had "A very durable line at three-three," but she plucked again.

"Shall I like it?" inquired the middle-aged woman trustfully.

The juvenile, listless, but confident, told her that she was "Quite sure to like that."

"You're sure?" said the lady. "Oh, very well then—I'll have it. Good day."

The third subscriber was still more free from the vice of favouritism. She simply stated that she wanted "A nice book to read." The librarian handed a book to her, and she accepted it as unquestioningly as if it had been stamps in a post-office. In not one of the three cases had any author's name been mentioned. There are popular writers, there is a public besieging the libraries for their work, but the literary choice of the Nation is bulk for its twopence and the tale approved by the child at the desk.

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"I hope you haven't been bored?" said Nina at last, holding out half-a-dozen volumes to be carried for her.

"Not in the faintest degree!" cried Conrad.

But he was exceedingly bored on the morrow when Ted returned to dinner with elaborate excuses for bringing his visit to a sudden close. Yes, the host was bored then; he knew so well while he responded: "What a nuisance!" and "Of course it can't be helped," that Ted was not in the least "needed in town," only dull in Sweetbay. They were all to have gone together to the "Orchestral Concert," and when the barrister alleged that he felt "too worn out," Conrad was not pressing. Nina went with him alone, and they walked some way before they spoke. She understood that he was hurt; dimly she understood that he had shown a stronger affection on his side than they had shown on theirs.

"So the experiment is a failure, Con?" she said.

He sighed. "I'm afraid there's no other word for it. It was rather idiotic of me—I might have known you'd all be hipped."

"Oh, I don't think it's that," she declared; "as a professional man Ted isn't free." She was ever ready to disparage Regina, but she had a soft spot in her shrewdness for Ted. "Of

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course," she added after a moment, "his going means that I shall have to go too; I can't stay with you by myself, ridiculous as these things are."

"No, I thought of that," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry *you're* going, Nina. It's no use trying to persuade him, I suppose? If you told him you didn't want to go——"

Every woman is to be touched by oral sentiment, excepting the sentiment of her lover whom she does not love. That irritates her to brutality. Nina wavered:—

"I might," she owned. "Perhaps he could arrange."

"It would be very nice of you," he said; "and really when you get used to Sweetbay, you'll find it has a—a certain charm. Hallo! What's the matter here? Are we too soon?"

They were opposite the theatre, but the building was dark. His heart sank; he felt that the stars in their courses were fighting against him.

"It isn't open," said Nina superfluously.

"We must have come too soon," he urged. "Let's cross over, and see what time it begins."

For a minute or two they peered at the glum frontage, puzzled, and then they descried—affixed by its flap to a large door—a small envelope. It was an official announcement. On the

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envelope was written, "No concert this evening."

They turned away, and moved in reverie towards the sea.

On the long lamp-blurred stretch of asphalt no one moved. A mile of downcast lodging-houses, veiled in gloom, kept hopeless watch over a blank Parade; in their dim fan-lights the legend of "Apartments" looked the emblem of despair. To the right, the black pier slumbered silently; to the left, a lugubrious hotel, unpeopled and unlit, imparted to the view the last symbol of disaster. On a sudden, spasmodically—in the wide-spread desolation—the town band burst into the overture to "Zampa." It was the jocularity of hysteria at a funeral. Nina gave a gulp, and clutched his arm.

"Conrad," she quavered, "let me go home tomorrow, or I shall cry!"

He did not plead with her; he recognised that there was some justice in her plaint. He promised that she should go by an early train, and his kindness cheered her.

She came down to breakfast with her hat on.

She, too, had *Punch* and a foot-warmer, and again he doubted if they were adequate to exculpate him.

"Try to bear no malice," he begged on the platform.

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"You'll dine with us as soon as you come back, won't you?" she laughed.

"Good-bye, old chap," exclaimed Ted. He had risen quite vivacious. "Mind you look me up when you're in town; let me know well ahead, and I'll manage a spare evening."

"I expect I've left a lot of things behind," said Nina brightly, bending to the window; "you might tell the servants to send them on."

"Yes, I'll tell them. Are you sure you don't want any more papers?"

"We're a long time starting, aren't we?" said Ted.

"You're just off," Conrad answered.

It was less than a week since he had loitered on the other side, impatient for their arrival. He forced a smile, and stood bareheaded, and turned from the station with a sigh.

"'Oh near ones, dear ones! you in whose right hands
Our own rests calm; whose faithful hearts all day
Wide open wait till back from distant lands
Thought, the tired traveller, wends his homeward way!
Helpmates and hearthmates, gladdeners of gone years'——

Where are you?" said Conrad.

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CHAPTER IV

He felt very lonely. Something of the Christmas spirit descended on him—the true, the unacknowledged Christmas spirit, in which, after we have directed the last stack of cards, and hurried out aglow with the last parcel, we sit before the bare mantel-piece, discovering that most of our acquaintances have become too advanced to observe the season. We are quite sure it is "advancement," though it looks a little like stinginess. He wondered, as he entered the lane, whether the other child he was remembering would have proved a disappointment too; wondered if the ache in his heart would be intelligible to her, or if he would appear to her absurd. It interested him to wonder. Conjecturing the disposition of the strange woman whose whereabouts he did not know, he endued her with many attributes that he admired, and she moved before his mental vision gradually as a fair and slightly pathetic figure, prepared to be his confidant. He fancied she was unhappy with her husband. At least the sadness of life

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had touched her enough to tinge her sentiment with cynicism, and she had flashes of wit on wet days.

It surprised him that he had made no attempt to trace her; his curiosity was awake. Many things were more unlikely than that she was living in the town. As he passed Rose Villa he was in two minds about ringing the bell and trying to gather information from the present occupants. Probably he would have obeyed the impulse, but while he hesitated the householder came out—a middle-aged little man, with a sanguine complexion, and gaiters.

Conrad accosted him. "Excuse me," he began.

The gentleman saluted with his crop. "'Morning," he said.

"I was looking at your bell with the idea of troubling you with an inquiry about a 'missing friend.' May I ask if you happen to know the address of your predecessor here—Dr. Page?"

"Who?" said the little man briskly.

"Dr. Page."

"No. Don't know the name. Took the place of people called—er—Greames. . . . Agents might tell you—Chipper and Stokes in the High Street. Page? Doctor? N-no." He shook his head. "Sorry."

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"I thank you."

"Not at all. Neighbours, I think, sir? For long?"

"No; it's a very temporary pleasure of mine," said Conrad.

"Congratulate you!" said the little man. "If your friend was a doctor, probably knew better than to stop. Much misled myself. Recommended here for my health. Most in-*ju*-rious! Damp, sir, Sweetbay is damp. They call it a 'humid atmosphere'; 'humid atmosphere' be damned, sir! Take your clothes off the peg in the morning and wring 'em out. That's not a humid atmosphere—it's a death-trap."

"You astonish me," said Conrad. "I understood the climate was so salubrious that the inhabitants would all live to be a hundred if they didn't die of the dulness young." He lifted his hat. "I am obliged."

"Pleasure," said the neighbour. "Er—hope we shall—er, er——"

"I hope so too," smiled Conrad. "Er—no doubt."

" 'Morning," said the gentleman, saluting with his crop.

It was discomfiting to find the occupant of Mary's former home so completely ignorant of Mary. Such ignorance, there, on the very

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threshold, in view of the sun shutters that had framed her face, seemed rather callous of him. As Conrad watched him swagger up the lane, he resented the usurper's privilege to stretch his gaitered legs on the hearth to whose history he was so utterly indifferent.

Somehow the drawing-room looked emptier still to Conrad for the colloquy, when he went indoors. In the violent disassociation of the next house from Mary Page, this one seemed suddenly foreign to him; suddenly he felt that he had committed a fatuous and a mournful act in taking it. Sweetbay had meant to him four persons, and of these, three had fled, and the fourth was lost. Why should he stay here? He thought vaguely of a little dinner up West, and a stall at the Alhambra. He nearly stretched his arm for the time-table—and all the while the melancholy that oppressed him urged him to remain and find Mary. His mind demanded her more insistently than before. It was no longer a whim: it was a strenuous desire. "After all, it would be a crazy thing, to go to London for pleasure!" he mused. "I'll hear what the agents have to say."

He strolled to their office after luncheon, and a small boy told him that Mr. Stokes was in. For once Conrad chafed at the local languor.

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The torpid tradesman, unconcerned whether he bought or not, had amused him, but the heavy young man who gazed at him with vacant eyes was irritating.

"Dr. Page?" echoed the young man dully; "Rose Villa? There was a Dr. Page in Esselfield, wasn't there?"

"I don't know," said Conrad. "Perhaps you can tell me. Where is Esselfield?"

"That's along the Esselfield Road," said Mr. Stokes with deliberation. "What do you want to know for?"

"I'm trying to learn the address of a friend who has moved," Conrad explained, labouredly polite.

"Oh y-e-s." He paused so long that it seemed doubtful if he would speak again. "There was a Dr. Page in Esselfield; I can't say if he's there still."

"The gentleman I mean was—well, he must be an elderly man," said Conrad. He could not remember in the least how Dr. Page had looked; he wished he knew his Christian name. "An elderly man. He had a family. They used to be at Rose Villa, next door to Mowbray Lodge. I'm talking of years ago—a good many years ago. . . . Perhaps your partner might be able to assist me?"

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"Major Bompas lives at Rose Villa now," said Mr. Stokes. His tone was a little firmer, the tone of one who says a helpful thing.

"And he took it of people called 'Greames'; I know all that. Dr. Page had the house before the Greames."

"Oh," murmured Mr. Stokes, "did he? Y-e-s. . . . No, I couldn't say, I'm sure. Mr. Greames lived there before Major Bompas. Mr. Greames was there a long while back."

"Dr. Page lived there in—let me think, where are we now? It must have been in eighteen seventy-seven."

"Oh Gawd!" said the young man faintly. For the first time an expression humanised his countenance, an expression of dismay tempered with entertainment. It made Conrad feel prehistoric. "Eighteen sev-enty-sev-en? I'm sure I couldn't tell you who lived there then!" A snigger escaped him. "There was a Dr. Page at Esselfield," he repeated; "he may have been at Rose Villa first."

"Is there any place in the town," asked Conrad, with frank disgust, "where it's possible to see an old directory?"

"I shouldn't think," averred the heavy young man, "that a directory was published in Sweetbay

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in 'sev-enty-sev-en." There was nearly a twinkle in his eyes.

"Thank you," said Conrad. "Good afternoon."

He went forth to seek the Esselfield Road incensed as well as disappointed now. 'Seventy-seven? Who was this blank-faced dolt to jeer at 'seventy-seven? Sweetbay had been an infinitely more attractive place in 'seventy-seven than it was to-day. The High Street bored him as he walked. Once it had been stimulating, replete with interest, and now it was unworthy his attention. He looked at it as a young girl looks at a married man. There was a fresh-coloured woman dandling her baby behind the glass door of a baker's shop as he passed, and he recognised with a frown that she had not been born in 'seventy-seven. It was a small matter, but it depressed him more.

The sepulchral window of a monumental mason caught his glance. Overhead was the inscription, "Established 1852." He wavered in his course and entered. The interior was like a premature graveyard, ranged with marble tombstones waiting for allotment, and brittle wreaths lamenting the dissolution of "Beloved" relatives who were still alive. There seemed to him something appropriate in pursuing his investigations

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among the tombstones. But though the business had been established in 1852, the mason himself proved to be very recent. When he realised that his interlocutor was not there to give an order, the sympathetic droop of his bearing evaporated, and he straightened into a careless soul to whom the mention of 'seventy-seven was almost as disconcerting as it had been to Mr. Stokes.

The Esselfield Road was thick with mud after the heavy rains. His long tramp—for he had learnt that it was necessary to walk—had no enlivening effect on Conrad's mood, nor was the village cheering when he reached it. A few houses were scattered beside a common; some geese waddled around a pond. Beyond an inn, a labourer in his cups shouted a refrain of the London music-halls.

Conrad went into the "bar-parlour," and asked for beer. In the sensitiveness to his years which was being so rapidly developed in him he observed with satisfaction that the untidy proprietress was middle-aged. "Yes, there had been a Dr. Page," she told him. "Not what you might call a regular doctor—he didn't do nothing. She believed he had moved into Sweetbay, so as to be near the sea."

"I understood that he moved here from Sweet-

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bay. An elderly man. He had a family," said Conrad with fatigue.

"There was two young gals," she agreed. "*They* was always about."

" 'About'?" he murmured.

"Picking, and skating, and that. I used to say they was never at 'ome."

"Oho?" said Conrad. And added to himself, "The younger children grown up. Girls of spirit!"—"When did they leave?" he continued.

"Oh, it must be a long time ago," she answered. She turned to a man who had the air of being her husband. " 'Ow long is it since that Dr. Page was 'ere, pa?"

"Dr. Page," drawled the man wonderingly. "Oh, it's a long time ago."

"Yes," she repeated, "it's a long time ago."

"But, roughly, how long?" persisted Conrad.

"W-e-ll, it must be—eight years or more," she said, visibly resenting an occasion to be definite.

In his soul he groaned; if eight years seemed so remote, what would they think of twenty-five? Again he was bowed beneath the sense of senility.

"You don't happen to know where he settled in Sweetbay?"

She shook her head, she had no idea at all; neither of the pair had any idea at all; so he fin-

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ished his ale, and paid for some cigars, which there was, of course, no need to smoke.

The lamps were winking through the dusk when he drew in sight of Sweetbay. At a stationer's he bought a directory of the current year, and studied it at the counter. It contained a "Captain Page," and "John Page, milkman." He found also "Miss Page, ladies' outfitter," and "Mrs. Page, laundress," but there was no "Page" of promise among the leaves. He availed himself of the opportunity to inquire again concerning the likelihood of his discovering an ancient copy of the work, but at his reference to 'seventy-seven the stationer, too, fell agape. It recurred to Conrad that in connection with Mr. Boultbee the post-office had been suggested. Physically he was tired by now, but mentally he was unflagging, and he bent his steps to the general post-office forthwith.

The clerk who sold the stamps to him "couldn't say"; she retired, however, to repeat his question to the postmistress, and it was at this point that the outlook brightened. The postmistress was a young and gracious woman in a pink blouse, and she came forward with a confident smile to inform him that Dr. Page was no longer a resident of Sweetbay, but had removed to Redhill. "Red-

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hill"? He had not suspected that anyone ever got out there.

"An elderly man. He had a family," he reiterated with exhaustion. "Two young girls."

"Oh, yes," she nodded, "that's the same. Very pretty, tall young ladies? *They* were always in and out."

"Really?" said Conrad. Mary's sister began to beckon to him. "Can you help me to communicate with Dr. Page?"

"We have the address he left with us—the one we used to forward letters to; I don't know if he's there still." She confessed the limitation of her knowledge with regret. "It's some years since he went."

"Perhaps you would be so merciful as to give me the one you have? I am an old friend of Dr. Page's family—very old—and till Providence directed my steps to you I despaired of finding them again." He outlined the difficulties he had encountered, but he had grown diffident of mentioning 'seventy-seven.

The postmistress laughed quite mirthfully at his experiences, which, encouraged by her appreciation, he touched up to no inconsiderable extent. After bidding the clerk turn to a book, she announced to him that the address was "Home Rest, Peregrine Place," and the assur-

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ance of his gratitude seemed amply to repay her.

Conrad went to bed with much more exhilaration than he had looked for. The day, after all, had seen something accomplished. Within his head, when he punched the pillow, the project of running Dr. Page to earth on the morrow promised agreeable developments. At the onset the interview would be a trifle embarrassing he foresaw, inasmuch as the gentleman on whom he intruded would certainly have no recollection of his name; but the ice would break under a few suave references to "My first visit to the neighbourhood since I was a boy," and "My little playmates of long ago"—he would put her in the plural, his inquiries could be concentrated gradually. If Mary herself were living at Redhill he might remain there. He would intimate that he thought of remaining—it would forefend the suspicion of impetuosity.

The sun was shining when he woke. The birds chirruped among the fir trees, and there were echoes of old-time music in his heart while he brushed his hair—until he fought to draw up a sailor's knot under one of those double collars that have led to so much domestic unhappiness at the breakfast-table.

He travelled by the South-Eastern and Chatham, but he reached Redhill, and smelt the tan-

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nery as he searched for an exit from the station. A porter directed him to Station Road, and told him to "bear to the left." The townlet seemed to him to blend the most unpleasant characteristics of Clapham Junction and Hanley in the Potteries. He started briskly. The way was long, and several times he paused to seek further information. Occasionally a carriage passed, the occupants with protesting noses. By degrees all the villas and the pavement dropped behind him; the smell of the tannery was fainter, and the path on either side was bordered by a hedge. From the altitude of a butcher's cart a boy in blue encouraged him with the assurance that Peregrine Place was "straight on." Presently the way wound, and a terrace of small semi-detached houses with little front gardens gladdened his view. As he drew close he saw "Home Rest" painted on the gate-post at the corner. Outside, in the sequestered road, a venerable tenant, with a velvet skull-cap and silvery hair, was pottering around a camera. At Conrad's approach he lifted his head, and regarded him with gentle curiosity. The sight of the blue eyes and placid face seemed suddenly familiar to Conrad; he felt far-off memories stirring in him as his gaze met the old man's features, and, doffing

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his hat, he murmured, with the deference that sat so well upon him:—

"Dr. Page, I think?"

"Heh?" said the old gentleman, inclining the other ear.

"You don't know me," said Conrad wistfully, but louder. "We haven't met since I was a boy, Dr. Page—that's many years ago!"

The old gentleman indicated Home Rest impatiently.

"Next door," he snapped. "Dr. Page lives next door!"

Conrad retreated with hasty apologies, feeling foolish. He would have preferred to stroll awhile before repeating his exordium, and only the consciousness of being watched by the old gentleman who had misled him constrained him to unlatch the gate.

A neat servant answered that Dr. Page was not at home. He was relieved.

"I'll call again," he said. "When do you expect him to come in?"

"Oh, he's away, sir, he won't be back for two or three days. Would you like to see Mrs. Page, sir?"

He had no remembrance of a Mrs. Page, but there was the objection to travelling fruitlessly and the thought that a woman would be sus-

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ceptible to the prettiness of his visit. He hesitated—he answered that he would. The girl conducted him to a small, cheerless drawing-room, and returned to say that Mrs. Page would be down in a few minutes. There were antimacassars everywhere, and the cold white mantelpiece exhibited the perpetual porcelain courtship which has never advanced; the amorous male still smirked inanely, and the simpering maiden seemed still to hope. Conrad was much attracted by a large album that reposed on an occasional table. He sat tempted to unclasp it, and had just risen and made a tentative step in its direction when he heard the door-knob move.

The lady who came in seemed to deprecate her entrance; she was evidently timid, and she blinked. He thought at first that she suffered from some affection of the eyes, but when she spoke, he opined that the blinking was due entirely to nervousness.

"Mr. Warrener?" she said in a whisper.

"Mrs. Page," he began, "I must crave your pardon for intruding on you in this fashion. It's very audacious of me because, even when I tell you who I am, I daren't suppose you will recollect me."

Her eyelids fluttered more, and she said:—

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"Wo—won't you sit down?" She wore mittens, and plucked at them.

"Thank you." Instinctively he lowered his voice, as if he were speaking to an invalid. "My excuse is rather unusual—I hope it won't appear to you preposterous. When I was a boy, your children and I used to be bosom friends, and I found myself in Sweetbay the other day for the first time since. I needn't tell you that I went to look at the house, and the desire to—to find them all again was very strong. . . . I was fortunate enough to learn that you had moved to Redhill, so I decided to risk your ridicule and throw myself on your forbearance."

"Oh, not at all," she faltered. "I—I'm sure I—" Her nervousness seemed increased, rather than diminished, by his address. There was an awkward pause.

"I trust Dr. Page and—and my former comrades are all well?"

"Oh, thank you, yes, they are all quite well."

He wished that Mary's were not the only name among them that he could recall; "All well!" he said, forcing a hearty note, "All well! It's strange to me to think of them as grown-up. Time—er—brings many changes, madam?"

"Indeed," she concurred timorously; "as you say!" But she volunteered no news, and he be-

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gan to feel that they were getting on slowly; his harassed gaze wandered to the china courtship.

"May I ask if they are still with you?" he ventured.

"My eldest daughter is married," she replied. "The others are . . . I hope very soon. I—er don't quite understand when it was you knew them? While we were in Sweetbay, I think you said?"

"Yes," he answered musingly, "when the daughter who is married was a little girl, Mrs. Page. To think that she's a woman and a wife! Why, Miss Mary and I were like brother and sister then—how wonderful it would be to meet her now!"

"My daughter's name is Ursula," she demurred. She blinked fast. There was another pause.

"'Ur—Ursula?'" stammered Conrad, with the precursory sinking of an awful fear. "Miss Mary *not* the eldest? . . . But surely at Rose Villa she was the eldest at home—during that summer, at least?"

"I think there must be some mistake," she quavered; "I have no daughter 'Mary.' I think there must be some mistake."

"Good heavens!" gasped Conrad. He was covered with confusion. "My dear madam,

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what can I say to you? I—I have been most shamefully deceived. I knew the family of a Dr. Page in Sweetbay in 'seventy-seven. I was assured—I was officially misinformed—that they had removed to Redhill. This house was mentioned to me as their residence. I am abased, I can't sufficiently express my regret. Possibly—I'll say 'probably'—my informant was led astray by the sameness of the surname and the profession, but nothing can excuse an error that has caused you so much annoyance. Nothing!" he repeated implacably. "I can only offer you my profoundest, my most contrite apologies."

The lady was now blinking so rapidly that it was dazzling to watch her.

"My husband never practised in Sweetbay," she said. "My husband's name is 'Napoleon Page.' We had never seen Sweetbay in 'seventy-seven. Our house was not called 'Rose Villa.' Oh dear no! I'm afraid there must be some mistake."

"Obviously," cried Conrad; "it overwhelms me. I shall severely reprimand the person who—who is responsible. Permit me to thank you for the patience, the infinite courtesy with which you have listened to my—my totally irrelevant reminiscences. I—Pray don't trouble to ring, madam!"

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His cheeks were hot when he gained the step. He walked towards the station swiftly, eager to leave Home Rest and Redhill far behind. Long after the train, for which he was obliged to wait, had started, the incident continued to distress him. He smarted anew in the compartment. He was even denied the unction of feeling that he had made a satisfactory exit, and the certainty that the lady would describe his later demeanour as "flurried" annoyed him more than he could say in the presence of his fellow-passengers. To fall into the mistake was natural, he argued, but he wished ardently that he had extricated himself from it with more grace, with more of the leisurely elegance that he could display if the situation were to occur again.

Well, he had done with his search for Mary! He said he abandoned it in disgust, and was still firm on the point when he reached Mowbray Lodge. He began to reconsider packing his portmanteaux. For two days he made no further inquiry of anyone, and lingered, as it were, under protest. Yet in England at least he might spend December amid worse surroundings than Sweetbay presented now; he owned that. From the chief thoroughfares the last speck of mud had long since been removed; the pink sidewalks shone as spotless as when he trod

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them in October. The air was tender, there was an azure sky, a sunlit sea curled innocently upon the beach. Yes, of a truth, he might fare worse. If it were not for the dulness, he could scarcely fare better. On the third afternoon, as he sauntered through the High Street, it occurred to him that it could do no harm to announce his failure to the mirthful postmistress. He did not pledge himself to resume his efforts, but—— It certainly *was* very dull, and if he were more explicit she might be able to give him another hint.

She recognised him at once, and advanced sparkling as before.

"Did you find your friends, sir?" she asked as he saluted her.

"I did not," said Conrad, "but I intruded on an inoffensive household who were perfect strangers to me. The Dr. Page whose address you very kindly furnished was not my Dr. Page at all."

"Oh dear! how very awkward," she said. "I am so sorry."

"It was awkward, wasn't it?" he concurred. "Of course I threw all the blame on you, so they forgave me, but I'm now quite helpless. My Sweetbay had closed over their heads, and to friends seem to have vanished as utterly as if complete the difficulty this family of spurious

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Pages arose since. I foresee that as often as I make another attempt I shall be directed to Redhill. I didn't like to tell you before, because it makes me sound so old, but the people I mean are the Pages who lived here in 'seventy-seven. I beg of you not to jump. Everybody jumps—that's why I have grown so nervous of mentioning the date."

Her eyes were full of amusement; she leant her elbows on the counter.

"I wasn't in the office then," she said reflectively.

"Naturally," he returned. "You must have been in your cradle. *I* was only a little boy. They were companions of my cherub stage; believe me, I was rosily young."

"There's a gentleman in the town who might be able to tell you something," she suggested: "Mr. Irquetson, the vicar of All Saints'. He has been here thirty years, or more."

"Really?" exclaimed Conrad, and added, "It's a shame to be beaten, isn't it?"

"Oh, it is," she agreed; "and he's a very nice gentleman; he'll be glad to help you if he can."

"Well, I think I'll go to see him; if he has been here thirty years, he can hardly fail to remember the Dr. Page I'm talking about." He

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glanced at the clock. "Do you think he's likely to be in now?"

"I should think the morning would be the best time, sir," she answered; "but you might try—it isn't far. If you'll wait a second, I'll write the address down for you."

"You are too good," said Conrad impressively. His pulses quickened at the chance. Instantly the thought of quitting Sweetbay was forgotten. Again he thanked her, and again she bowed graciously over her pink blouse as he withdrew. When he turned at the doors, she was bowing still.

They swung to behind him, and he wished he had reported himself to her three days ago. What amiability! He had never seen anything to compare with it in a post-office. As he strode towards the vicar's, he was possessed by amazement. The experience had an air of the ideal, as everybody will admit. Probably the mirthful postmistress was the only member of her calling ever known to exhibit a pleasant countenance to the public, excepting— But the Exception merits a paragraph to herself, and as she has nothing to do with the story, you are recommended to skip to the next chapter.

Excepting a little lady who once brightened the ancient post-office of Southampton Row.

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The "post-office," have I said? Rather should I say she brightened the district with that sunny smile of hers, and the daily flower freshening her neat little frock. To watch her, it seemed she found long hours "in the cage" the very poetry of bread-winning. Dull matrons from Russell Square, and tired clerks from Guilford Street alike felt the encouragement of her cheerfulness, and went on their way refreshed. One may well believe she was the unwitting cause of many kindly actions in West Central London, for a crowd was ever at the counter, and the sourest soul of all on whom she smiled must for a space have viewed the world with friendlier eyes. Often I used to wonder, as I bought a postcard and waited for the farthing change, whether it was interest in her duties, or the message of the daily flower that kept that light of happiness in the girlish face. When she vanished, Southampton Row was grey. They repainted and replanned it; and built spruce hotels, and pink "mansions," but nothing could make good the loss. It was whispered that she had left to be married. All Bloomsbury must hope that he is kind to her!

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CHAPTER V

And after that little tribute, which has been owing for more years than it exhilarates me to count—and which has been paid with no expense to any one who followed my advice—let us overtake Conrad on the doorstep, where he had just learnt that the vicar was at home.

The Rev. Athol Irquetson was a sombre-eyed priest with a beautiful voice. In his zeal, he had studied how to use it—under an eminent actor; in his discretion, he suppressed the fact—for he knew his Sweetbay. He had also a fine faculty for gesture, which his parishioners found "impressive"—and which they would have found "theatrical" had they guessed that for years it had been cultivated daily before a looking-glass. Why invalidate an instrument? To admiring friends he said his gestures "came to him." They did, by this time. He waved Conrad's apologies aside, and motioning towards a seat, sank slowly into a study-chair himself. Conrad ardently appreciated the pose of his hand there, as—a pensive profile supported by his finger-tips—the

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vicar asked, in a voice to make converts: "And what can I do for you?"

Yes, he remembered Dr. Page. Dr. Page was dead. But soon it was the vicar's turn to be appreciative, for the intruder's glance kept straying to the Canaletto prints that graced the walls, and it was a rare thing for Mr. Irquetson to have a visitor to whom they spoke. Those glances warmed his heart, and a digression melted his reserve.

"There are not many," he said; "but I think my small room is the richer on that account."

"Surely," said Conrad. "If a picture is worth owning, it is worth a spacious setting. A mere millionaire may buy a gallery, but it takes a man of taste to hang a sketch. I have always thought that a picture calls for two artists—one to create it, and the other to prepare his wall for its reception."

"But how little the second art is understood. Of course the eye should be enabled to rest on a picture reposefully. The custom of massing pictures in conflicting multitudes is barbarous. It's like the compression of flowers into bundles that hide half their loveliness. The Western mind is slowly learning from the Japanese that a flower ought to be displayed so that we may appreciate

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its form. I have hope that when they have taught us how a flower should be put in water, they may proceed to teach us how a picture should be hung."

Quite ten minutes passed in such amenities.

"Yes, Dr. Page died long ago," said the deep voice again; but the subject was resumed in a manner almost intimate; "his wife was living at —Malvern, I think. There was—it was common knowledge at the time—some domestic unhappiness late in life; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it culminated late in life, for, like so many mighty issues, I believe it originated in a seeming trifle. He was a man acutely sensitive to noise, and his wife was decidedly a noisy woman. I remember his remarking once that if she touched a cup it had a collision with all the china on the table, and that a newspaper in her hands became an instrument of torture. No doubt he could have controlled his irritability, but by all accounts his temper grew unbearable. However, the news of his death must have been a blow to the lady, for he died suddenly soon after they had separated. Death is a wondrous peacemaker. The gravest offence looks smaller in our eyes when it is too late to condone it."

"Yes," assented Conrad;

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" 'And I think, in the lives of most women and men,
There's a moment when all would go smooth and even,
If only the dead could find out when
To come back, and be forgiven.' "

"That is a beautiful thought," said the vicar, "or, speaking more strictly, I should say it is an ordinary thought beautified. From one of Owen Meredith's early poems, isn't it? But do you remember those lines of Coventry Patmore's to the dead?

" 'It is not true that Love will do no wrong.
Poor Child!
And did you think, when you so cried and smiled,
How I, in lonely nights, should lie awake,
And of those words your full avengers make?
Poor Child, poor Child!
And now, unless it be
That sweet amends thrice told are come to thee,
O God, have Thou *no* mercy upon me!
Poor Child!' "

"Oh," exclaimed Conrad, "exquisite! I used to read Coventry Patmore all day. Do you know 'Departure'?—'With *huddled,* unintelligible phrase!' . . . Ah! surely his hope was not vain—the Posterity he respected will respect him. But—but," he bubbled, "I am so glad I came! My dear sir, you enchant me; your recog-

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nition of Owen Meredith alone would make the interview memorable."

"Ah!" returned Mr. Irquetson, with a whimsical smile, "there was once a time when I read much poetry—and wrote much verse; and I have a good memory. I remember"—his trained gaze took in the name, which he had forgotten, on the card—"I remember, Mr. Warrener, when I used to pray to be a poet."

"Do you think prayers are ever answered?" inquired Conrad. "In my life I have sent up many prayers, and always with the attempt to persuade myself that some former prayer had been fulfilled. But I knew—I knew in my heart none ever had been. Things that I have wanted have come to me, but—I say it with all reverence—at the wrong time, as the means to buy unlimited toffee comes to a man when he has outgrown his taste for sweets."

Mr. Irquetson's fine hand wandered across his brow.

"Once," he began conversationally, "I was passing with a friend through Grosvenor Street. It was when in the spring the tenant's fancy lightly turns to coats of paint, and we came to a ladder leaning against a house that was being redecorated. In stepping to the outer side of the ladder, my friend lifted his hat to it; you may

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know the superstition? He was a Varsity man, a man of considerable attainments. I said, 'Is it possible that you believe in that nonsense?' He said, 'N—no, I don't exactly believe in it, but I never throw away a chance!'" On a sudden his inflexion changed, his utterance was solemn, stirring, devout: "I think, sir, that most people *pray* on my friend's principle—they 'don't believe in it, but they never throw away a chance!'"

He had said it before; the whole thing was too assured, too finished, for an impromptu; but the effect of that modulation was superb. All the artist in Conrad responded to it.

"And when they are sincere?" he questioned, after a pause; "for they are sometimes. Your walls remind me how passionately I prayed to be a painter. And your own prayers, I take it, came from the soul when you craved to be a poet."

"But should I have been more useful as a poet? It wouldn't have contented me to write —let us say—'The Better Land,' and more minds are to be influenced by simple sermons than by great poetry. You think, perhaps, that as a painter you would have been happier. But perhaps you wouldn't. We are often like little children petitioning their parents for the dan-

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gerous. I will not suggest that a merciful God chastises us to demonstrate our error, but many an observant man must have noticed the truth that what we have desired most strenuously often proves an affliction to us, while the only sunshine in our lives is shed by the thing that we prayed might never come to pass."

"Yes," said Conrad, thoughtfully, "I have seen more than one example of that. But if we are mere blunderers beseeching in the dark—if we are like children importuning their parents without discernment, as you say—isn't the act of prayer futile? Isn't it even presumptuous?"

Mr. Irquetson raised his head, his eyes looked upward; "No—pray!" he said, and the melody of his tone gave glory to a commonplace. "Pray," he repeated, and Conrad wanted to kneel to him then, there, on the study floor. "One day perhaps you will afford me an opportunity to make my thoughts on prayer quite clear to you. Pray—but with fervour, and with sense. With humility! Sir, I cannot reconcile my faith in an omniscient Creator with the idea that it is necessary to advise Him that we need rain in Rutland. . . . But I'm withholding the little information that I am able to give you. I was about to say that Mrs Page, so far as I know,

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lives still at Malvern—or perhaps it was Matlock; and the eldest girl——"

"Mary?" interposed Conrad.

"Quite so, 'Mary.' Mary married some time before her father's death, and is settled in London, I think. My wife would know her whereabouts better than I, she is friendly with a resident who has some fitful correspondence with Mrs. Bailey."

"'Mrs. Bailey' is the eldest girl's married name?"

"Well, it used to be," replied the clergyman, with another of his smiles. "But I was wrong—I should have said 'Mrs. Barchester-Bailey.' She acquired the 'Barchester' after the ceremony; I cannot supply its exegesis. The result of six months in the capital, I suppose, though it is not everybody who can make such a great name in London in six months."

"Much may be done in six months; his parents gave Keats to the world in seven," said Conrad. "I am infinitely grateful to you for your kindness." He rose. "If Mrs. Irquetson should mention Mrs. Barchester-Bailey's address to you, and you would have the additional goodness to let me know it——"

"I will drop you a line to-night—or to-mor-

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row at the latest," declared the vicar; and he scribbled on the card.

"Good-bye," said Conrad. "I shall always be your debtor for more than the address, sir."

"Good-bye," said the vicar, extending his hand; and 'good-bye' as he pronounced it was a benediction.

Conrad had been so much impressed—so uplifted by the cleric's manner—that, instead of swinging homeward in high feather at the end of his difficulties, he proceeded slowly, in serious meditation. It was not until the following afternoon when he learnt that Mrs. Barchester-Bailey's residence was 'Beau Séjour, Hyperion Terrace, Upper Tooting,' that interest in his project was again keen. Then there was a little throb in his pulses; a little tremor stole from the note; he had annihilated the obstacles of five-and-twenty years—it excited him to realise that he stood so close to her who had been Mary Page.

The "Barchester," however, disturbed him somewhat. A woman who reverenced apocryphal hyphens promised less companionship than he had pictured. . . . Perhaps the snobbishness was her husband's. Tooting? He had a dim recollection of driving through it once, on his way somewhere. Was it to the Derby?

Well, he supposed the correct course would be

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to write to her and hint at his return to town. He wondered whether the signature would waken memories in her if she perpended it. Unless it did, the letter was likely to prove a failure —he could not indite a very stimulating epistle to a married woman of whom he knew nothing. Yet to call on her without writing—? No, he must stand, or fall, by the signature. That would say everything, if it said anything at all. . . . How stupid, in the circumstances, "Dear Madam" sounded!

And what a stumbling-block it looked!

"Dear Madam"—he wrote—"Though I cannot hope you will be able to recall my name, I think you may remember Mowbray Lodge. I am regretting very much, during my visit, that Mrs. Page is not my neighbour. It would have given me so much pleasure to call on her, and to meet the family who were such very good comrades of mine in the year when this house was a school, kept by Mr. Boultbee, and a posse of children came down for the summer holidays. Perhaps the names of my cousins, Nina and 'Gina, may be more familiar to you than my own? At least those old-time friends of yours have shared my disappointment. It is only since they left that I have had the good fortune to hear

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your address mentioned. Will you pardon a stranger writing to express this vehement interest on the part of people whom you have probably forgotten? If I debated the matter for long, my courage would desert me, and I should leave my cousins to make their own inquiries next week, when I go back to town. On the other hand, if you and your sisters remember us, pray believe that none sends kinder regards to you all than— Yours truly,

"CONRAD WARRENER."

"Come, I don't think anybody can take exception to that," mused Conrad. And he sent it to the post, with a line of thanks to Mr. Irquetson.

On the next evening but one he began to doubt if she meant to reply. It seemed to him the sort of thing a woman would acknowledge immediately if she didn't mean to ignore it altogether. Yet why should she ignore it? Silence would be rather uncivil, wouldn't it—a humiliation needlessly inflicted? If she had reasons for wishing to decline his acquaintance, it was quite possible to prevent his advancing, and to frame an urbane answer at the same time. Had he said too much about Nina and 'Gina, appeared too much in the light of an amanuensis? Surely she had the wit to understand?

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Four or five days passed before he tore open an envelope stamped with the initials "M. B. B." The enclosure began "Dear Sir," and his brows contracted.

"Dear Sir"—he read—"I was very surprised to receive your letter. What a long time ago, is it not? It is very nice of you all to remember us after so long. I left Sweetbay at the time of my marriage, and have been living in Tooting some years now. My mother has removed to Matlock. If you or your cousins are ever in the neighbourhood I shall hope to have a chat over old times. Please give them my remembrances. With kind regards—Yours truly,

"MARY BARCHESTER-BAILEY."

There were only three wrong ways of beginning a response—three blatant solecisms—and she had chosen one of them when she wrote "Dear Sir." Conrad was disappointed. The "fair and slightly pathetic" figure of his dreams grew fainter; his ideal confidant didn't make these mistakes. He put the missive in his pocket, and drew dejectedly at his pipe.

"Of course I shall go," ran his thoughts, "but I've made rather an ass of myself, taking such trouble to find her!"

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CHAPTER VI

THE man to whom he gave his ticket at the station of Balham and Upper Tooting told him that he could walk to Hyperion Terrace in about ten minutes. He perceived that he would reach the house too early if he proceeded there at once, so he strolled awhile in the opposite direction. The pavements were dry, and he was thankful, for he had seen no cab when he came down the station stairs, and he would have been chagrined to present himself in muddy boots.

When he estimated that he would arrive at Beau Séjour none too soon to be welcome, he retraced his steps, and now anticipation warmed his blood once more. After all, she was the woman who had been Mary Page—it was a piece of his boyhood that awaited him. Indeed, he was repentant that he had cavilled at minor defects. By dint of inquiries he found the way to Hyperion Terrace. It was new, and red, and all that a man who could call a street "Hyperion Terrace" would naturally create.

A very small servant, wearing a very pre-

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tentious cap, showed him at once to the drawing-room, where "The Soul's Awakening" met his distressed view, on a pink and gold wall-paper. He heard flying footsteps overhead, sounds of discomposure; there are houses at which a visitor always arrives too early. His nerves were tremulous while he sat alone. But Mary's home would have pleased him better if it had been no more than a single room, with a decent etching over a bed masquerading as a sideboard, and half-a-dozen shilling classics on a shelf.

"Mr. Warrener? How d'ye do?"

She advanced towards him with a wide smile, a large and masculine woman wearing a vivid silk blouse, and an air of having dressed herself in a hurry. She wore also, with a droll effort at deception, a string of "pearls" which, if it had been real, would have been worth more than the street. For an instant his heart seemed to drop into his stomach; and in the next an overwhelming compassion for her swept him. He could have shed tears for her, as he took her hand, and remembered that she had once been a dainty child.

"Mrs. Barchester-Bailey—so good of you to let me call."

"Oh, I'm sure it was very kind of you to come!" she said. "Won't you sit down? . . .

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How very odd that you should have been living in Mowbray Lodge, isn't it? Quite a coincidence."

"Yes," he said, "yes. I wanted a place there, and Mowbray Lodge happened to be to let for a few months. It was the first time I had been to Sweetbay since that summer. . . . Your old house looks just the same—the outside at least; I've not been in it."

"Really?" she said. "Yes—does it?"

"Yes. . . . And the lane looks just the same too, until you get to the field; and then—then there isn't one. But perhaps that had vanished before you left?"

"No, there was no change when I was down there last, but that's a long while ago! Horrid old place! I'm very glad there's nothing to take me there any more."

"Didn't you like it?" he asked, pained.

"Oh, it was so slow! I wonder how I put up with it as long as I did. Didn't you find it slow? I must have gaiety. People tell me I'm a regular gadabout, but—" She laughed—"one's only young once, Mr. Warrener; I believe in having a good time while I can. I say I shall have plenty of time to be on the shelf by-and-by."

She was very, very plain. It was while he was thinking how plain she was, how ruthless the

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years had been to her, that the sudden pity for himself engulfed him—the pathetic consciousness that she must be reflecting how hard the years had been on *him*.

"It can't be difficult for you to have a good time," he returned, labouredly light.

"Well, I don't think it is," she declared; she tossed her large head, and rolled colourless eyes at him archly. "People tell me I've quite woke Tooting up since I've been here, and I must say I've done my best. I must *lead*. I mean to say, if I'd been a man I should have liked to be a great politician or a great general, you know."

"You could be nothing more potent than Mrs. Barchester-Bailey."

"Oh, now, that's very sweet of you!" she said. "But I mean to say I must *lead*. *I* started the Tooting 'Thursdays.' You mustn't think I'm just a frivolous little woman who cares for nothing but pleasure, I'm—I'm very interested in literature too. At the 'Thursdays' we have literary discussions. Next week the subject is Miss Verbena's novels. Now which do *you* think is Miss Verbena's greatest novel?"

He could only assume that she never saw a comic paper. "I—I'm afraid I haven't read any of them," he owned.

"Oh! Oh, you surprise me. Oh, but you

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must: they're enormously clever. Ettie Verbena is quite my favourite novelist, excepting perhaps that *dear* man who writes those immensely clever books that never offend in any way. So pure they are, such a true religious spirit in them! You know, Mr. Warrener, I'm a curious mixture. People tell me that I seem to enjoy myself just as much talking to a very clever man as when I'm romping through a barn-dance. And it's true, you know, that *is* me. But I suppose you're more interested in stocks and shares, and things like that, than in books?"

"Well, I—I shouldn't describe myself as widely-read," answered Conrad; "still books do interest me."

"Oh well, then, you must come on one of my At-Home days next time," she said graciously; "one of the ladies you'll meet writes for 'Winsome Words,' and you'll meet several people you'll like."

"I should be charmed," he said.

The servant bustled in, and carried a bamboo table to the hearth. As she threw the teacloth over it, a cold wind blew through his hair.

"Do your cousins live in London?" inquired Mrs. Barchester-Bailey, with the tail of a worried eye on the maid's blunders.

"Yes," he said, "yes, they do. But I haven't

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seen them since I came back. I'm not sure whether they're in town."

"Are they married?"

"Yes," he said again. "Oh yes, they're married—both of them."

"Where are they?" she asked; "anywhere this way?"

"No; unfortunately they're a long way off. That's the drawback to town, isn't it? Everybody lives at such a distance from everybody else."

"Oh, I don't know," she said; "one can get about so quickly nowadays. What part are they in?"

"Nina lives at Regent's Park," he replied, "where the fogs are."

"Oh, really? Regent's Park?" She seemed impressed. "I was wondering whether she would care to join our Thursday debates—we want to get as many members as we can. Two of the ladies come over from Wandsworth, but from Regent's Park it would be a drag certainly. Shall I put in sugar and milk?"

"Please." He took the cup, and sat down again—and knew that he had entered on that grade of society where there are no more men and women, and they all become "ladies" and "gentlemen."

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"And the other one—'Gina?" she continued.

He felt very uncomfortable; he wouldn't say "Mayfair."

"'Gina lives further west," he murmured. "No, I won't have any cake, thank you."

"Then your cousins are quite high up?" she exclaimed.

"'High up?'"

"They're quite swells?"

"Oh!" he shrugged his shoulders. "No, I don't think I should call them that. Too swell for *me*, rather, but then I'm half a Colonial, and the other half a bohemian. I haven't been Home long—it's all strange to me; until I came out here to-day I had no idea London could be so picturesque. How glorious your Common must be in the summer!"

"So healthy!" she said promptly; "the air is so fine. We moved here from the Westend for the children's sake."

"You have children?"

"Oh!" she rolled her eyes again. "Four, Mr. Warrener. My eldest boy is getting quite big—people tell me they wouldn't believe he was mine at all, but it makes me feel quite old sometimes to look at him. I think it's cruel of children to grow up, don't you?"

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He stifled a sad assent. "Sometimes they grow up still more charming," he said.

"Oh, now, that's very sweet of you! Now really that's very pretty! But I mean to say I think it's cruel to us when they shoot up so fast. You're not married yourself yet, eh?"

"No, I hate asking favours."

"What a modest way of putting it! But you should. A good wife would be the making of you, and give you something to think about. Don't you know that?"

"I'm sure of it. A man can have no greater blessing than a good wife—excepting none," he concluded mentally. "Shall I be allowed to see them before I go?"

"The children? Would you like to? Dudley is out, but the others are just going to have tea in the next room. My husband isn't back from the city yet, of course. Oh, the city! what a hold it does get on you men. As if it really mattered whether you made an extra thousand pounds one month or not!" A trayful of crockery rattled, and the footsteps of the little servant thudded through the passage.

"You're quite right," said Conrad. "What does it matter, when one comes to think of it?"

"Not but what Herbert's the best of boys," she added. "If it weren't that——" She hesi-

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tated, she endeavoured to look confused. "The fact is, he's—he's jealous, he's a very jealous man. Not that he has any reason to be—not exactly. Of course I'm awfully fond of him; he's a dear old silly! But I mean to say, I can't help it when men want to talk to me—now can I? If I get half-a-dozen men round me, even though we're only talking about the simplest thing, he doesn't like it. Of course it makes it awfully awkward for me socially."

"It must," responded Conrad; "yes, I can understand that."

"I tell him he should have married a different woman." She giggled.

"Ah, but how unreasonable of you!" he said. "Then—if they won't mind being disturbed—I am really to see your children?"

"Oh, they won't mind at all, but I'm afraid you'll find them very untidy—they've just been having high jinks."

She led him to them presently, and slammed the door behind her. It shook his thoughts to the clergyman's description of Mrs. Page. Heredity again, perhaps! Two girls of about twelve or fourteen years of age, and a boy in a pinafore were sitting at a table. At their mother and the visitor's entrance, they all took their hands off the cloth and stared.

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"And so this is the family?" cried Conrad, trying to sound enthusiastic. "How do you do? And will *you* say 'how do you do' to me, my little man?"

Three limp hands flopped to him in turn, and he stood contemplating the group, while the lady cooed silly questions to them, and elicited dull, constrained replies. They were not attractive children; they were indeed singularly uninteresting children—even for other people's, whose virtues seldom strike us vividly. To Conrad, who failed to allow sufficiently for their shyness, they appeared stupidity personified. "Yes," and "No," they answered; and their eyes were round, and their mouths ajar. Like all children, from the lower to the middle classes inclusive, they proclaimed instantaneously the social stratum of their parents. With a monosyllable a child will do this. It is by no means impossible for a man to exchange remarks with a girl from a showroom, and at the end of five minutes to be still uncertain to what class she belongs. But when the intrusive little cub in the sailor suit romps up to her, he betrays the listless beauty's entourage with the first slovenly words he drops.

"Have your cousins any children, Mr. Warrener?"

"Yes," he said, "oh yes, they have three or

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four each." He was speculating what individuality lay concealed behind the vacant fronts. Their mother had been no older than the eldest when he was sick with romance for her—oh, positively "romance," although its expression had been ludicrous in that period! Was it possible that these meaningless little girls also had precocity and sweethearts? Appalling thought—had Mary been so unpleasant? Had he idealised a dirty mouth?

"I should like to see them. I wish Nina and —er—'Gina would come over one morning to lunch." Her tone was painfully eager. "Or I might look them up. Do you know their 'days'?"

"No," he murmured, "I can't say I do. I——"

"Perhaps they'll come with you next time?"

"I hope you'll see them sooner; it's more than likely I go back to Paris in a day or two—I only left a few weeks ago. I may remain there through the year."

"Oh, really?" she exclaimed. "Then you have no business in London? Mary," she broke off impatiently, "what is it? What is Ferdie fidgeting about for—what does he want?"

"Jam, ma," said the plainer of the girls in a whisper.

"What do you say? Do speak up, dear!"

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"Jam, ma," repeated her daughter; "he wants jam on the first piece."

"Well, give him it then. Only this once, now, darling. You shouldn't tease him so, Mary—remember he's a very little boy."

Mary *minor* leant towards him, and Conrad thought she muttered "Little pig!"

"Then you have nothing to do in London?" resumed the lady, as he followed her from the room.

"Quite all that I hoped to do in London I have done this afternoon," he smiled. "As a matter of fact, I don't suppose I shall call on anybody else before I leave." But he saw clearly that she wanted to know the women who were "high up," and he was self-reproachful. Distressed, he wished that he had made no reference to them in his letter.

"Shan't you even go to see your cousins?" she persisted. "But you say you're not sure if they're in town? If they are, any day would suit me. If they would drop me a line——"

"No," he said, "I'm not sure; I haven't heard from either of them since they left Sweetbay." He was at the point of mentioning Nina's address; he reminded himself that he had a duty to Nina too.

Yet a moment later he succumbed. The re-

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membrance of what he had written, even civility itself, prevented his parrying so keen an aim as Mrs. Barchester-Bailey's. He mentioned the address, and he said how pretty the plain children were, and "regretted that her husband was not in." He sat smiling at boredom for five minutes longer, and when he escaped at last he had the reward of knowing that she thought he admired her very much. He had owed her that.

As he felt the air in his lungs he thanked heaven. Well, he would explain the occurrence to Nina, who would consider him an idiot, and tell her to expect a speedy visit. The rest lay with the visitor herself—with her powers to please. For his own part, never, never did he want to see her again. He walked fast, her image still pursuing him. What an exhausting woman!

He dined at his club and wondered if it would be bad taste for so new a member to make a complaint to the committee. Afterwards he drifted into a music-hall, where quailing brutes who had been created to scamper on four legs were distorted to maintain a smirking brute who was unworthy to walk on two. The animals' sufferings diverted the audience vastly, and the applause sickened Conrad more than the club dinner.

And though his disappointment at Tooting

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may sound a very trivial matter, it continued to depress him. He was sad, not because one woman was different from what he had hoped to find her, but because the difference in the one woman typified so much that seemed pathetic to him in life. And to sneer at him as a sentimentalist absorbed by opal-tinted sorrows blown of indolence, would not be conclusive. It is, of course, natural that those of us who have to struggle should set up the Man of Leisure as a figure to be pelted with precepts—indeed, we pelt so hard at the silver spoon in his mouth that between the shies we might well reflect that Ethics is often an *alias* of Envy—but with Conrad the leisure was quite recent, and the sentiment had ached for years. In his case wealth had not formed a temperament, wealth had simply freed it.

Let us accept him as he was. My business is to present, not to defend. Were tales tellable only when the "hero" fulfilled both definitions of the word, reviewers would have less to do. If I could draw, a frontispiece should enlist your sympathies for him: "Conrad and the Coquette;" for that is Youth—a laughing jilt showing us her heels, and tempting over her dimpled shoulder as she flies.

This is where you begin to think me insuffer-

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ably dull. I see your fair brow clouding, I can see your beautiful lips shaping to say, "Oh, bother!" Be patient with me; we have arrived at a brief interval in which nothing particular happened. It is true that soon afterwards Conrad went to Monte Carlo, but details would not interest you in the least. Be gracious to me; yield to the book another finger-tip—I feel it slipping. Say, "Poor drivel as it is, a man has written it in the hope of pleasing me." For he has indeed. On many a fine morning I have plodded when I would rather have sunned myself where the band played; on many an evening I have wound my feet round the legs of the table and budged not, when the next room and a new novel—paid for and unopened—wooed me as with a siren song. And all to win a smile from You.

I have thought of you so often, and wanted to know you; you don't realise how I have longed to meet you—to listen to you, to have you lift the veil that hides your mind from me. Sometimes in a crowd I have fancied I caught a glimpse of you; I can't explain—the poise of the head, a look in the eyes, there was something that hinted it was You. And in a whirlwind of an instant it almost seemed that you would recognise me; but you said no word—you passed, a secret

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from me still. To yourself where you are sitting you are just a charming woman, with "a local habitation and a name"; but to me you are not Miss or Madam, not M. or N., you are a Power, and I have sought you by a name you have not heard—you are my Public.

And O my Lady, I am speaking to you! I feel your presence in my senses, though you are far away and I can't hear your answer. I do wrong to speak like this; I may be arraigned for speaking; I have broken laws for the honour of addressing you—among all the men who have worshipped you, has one done more?—and I will never offend again. But in this breathless minute while I dare, I would say: "Remember that over-leaf, and in every line unto the end I shall be picturing *you,* working for *you,* trembling lest *you* frown." Unto the End. Forgive me! I have sinned, but I exult—it is as if I had touched your hand across the page.

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CHAPTER VII

CONRAD drifted from the Riviera with the rest, and lingered through June in Paris; not on the left bank this time—in the Paris of the Boulevards and the Bois, where he was a world away from the quarter where he had run to clasp the illusions of his youth, and stayed to mourn them. Although he was finding life pleasant, there were moments when he looked at the bridges, and felt wistful; but he never crossed one—he knew now that he could not walk over the Pont Neuf into the Past.

Nor was it with any definite purpose that he returned to London. Amusement, agreeable society, had lulled that desire to revisit old scenes. And his experiments had been such failures: the endeavour to recapture his fervour as an art-student; the ludicrous attempt to revive in cynical adults the buoyant comradery of childhood; the interest in the little girl whom time had turned into the least interesting of women—it was with a mental blush that he recalled these follies. If he thought no less tenderly of his

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youth, he thought of it less often; if he was still liable to a sense of bereavement, he was now idling as conventionally as any other man of his class.

He arrived in London while the sun shone, and told the cabman to drive to the Carlton, where some Americans whom he liked in Monte Carlo had talked of staying. After he had made himself presentable, he descended to the palm court, and ordered tea, and glanced round the groups that sipped and chatted. His Americans were not there—perhaps they had gone to another hotel, after all. By-and-by he inquired about them, and learnt that they were unknown. He was hipped, for they had been companionable, and one of the women was very pretty. He felt rather "out of it" among the dawdling groups.

During dinner he asked himself to what theatre he should go. He remembered reading recently that a farcical comedy had scored a great success, and decided to go to see that. One of his oddities was a reluctance to inconvenience people by passing in front of them in a theatre after the curtain had risen, so he didn't dally at the table. The piece began at a quarter past eight. He had a cup of coffee, and a red grand marnier, and slid into a hansom. There would

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be just time to smoke a cigarette comfortably during the drive.

Hansoms darted everywhere in the pale evening—a man and a pal, a man and a girl, a man going to meet a girl. From Pall Mall the line of liveries rolled up endlessly, the broughams and landaus flashing glimpses of coiffures, and jewelled ears, and flowers. Where a block occurred in the traffic, a young man, who had paused on the curb, in a dress-suit that looked rather tight for him, bowed delightedly to the occupants of a victoria, and they beamed in response. The encounter was gratifying on both sides, for the young man had not often occasion to put on a dress-suit, and his acquaintances had not long acquired a carriage. Conrad, who missed the humour of the incident, was again sensible of loneliness in an atmosphere where everybody but himself seemed to know someone. But as he passed a barrow at the corner of a side street he appreciated the humour of a costermonger shouting, "Liedy, I can sell you some o' the finest cherries that was ever brought into this country!"

When he entered the house the overture was being played, and as he squeezed towards his chair a faint hope rose of discerning his Monte Carlo companions among the audience. He sat

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down, between a lady with a moustache and a youth who was trying to cultivate one, and scanned the profiles that were visible, but there was none he recognised.

The attendants were still busy; in his velvet fauteuil he watched the arrivals almost as eagerly as the Poor had watched them on the pavement. What white backs the women had when they slipped them out of their cloaks! he wondered if it was safe for them to lean against the seats. With what geometrical perfection the hair margined the napes of their slender necks! how did they do it?

The rising excitement of the overture warned him that it was about to bang to an end. His programme had fallen to the floor. He stooped for it with the idea of looking at the cast before the lights were lowered.

At this moment the lady in the stall next to him took out her handkerchief.

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CHAPTER VIII

As she did so the curtain went up, and showed a divided scene. But Conrad was not attending. On the right, the stage represented the office of a matrimonial agent; on the left, the office of an agent who obtained "reliable evidence for divorce." The two careers were followed by the same person under different names—his introductions in the first capacity led to business in the second. He explained this soon after he bustled on, and the audience laughed. But Conrad did not hear. The lady still held her handkerchief, a scrap of lawn and lace that was scented with chypre—and he had been heaved to Rouen and was seventeen years old there, by the side of The Woman We Never Forget.

For in the life of every man, whether he will own it or not, there is at least one unmentioned woman whom he never permanently forgets while he keeps his faculties. She may not be the best, or the prettiest, or even the nicest woman he has loved—not her virtues, but his madness, graved so deep—and he will take the

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impression out sometimes when he has lost his figure and his hair, and when a boy who is storing experiences on his own account calls him "the governor." No, her qualities have as little to do with the matter as the date on her birth certificate. A woman isn't her age, or herself; she is what she makes us feel—like art, and nature, like a musical phrase, or a line of words, like everything of suggestion and mystery. The woman her husband hates and her lover adores, is an equally vivid personality to both men. That to herself she is vividly a third character makes no difference to the view of either of them.

To say that on the few occasions Conrad had smelt chypre during the last twenty years it had never failed to "remind" him of Mrs. Adaile—to say this would be to imply that he yielded himself leisurely to reverie, and it would sound truer than the truth. But the fact is that there was nothing voluntary at all in what occurred. It was a physical swirl that the smell always caused him, and it left him vibrant for a few seconds with the very craving, the very sickness of the time when he had worshipped her. He often thought of her, even strummed a song she used to sing, but in such moments as these he was less conscious of thinking than of feeling. Normally he looked back at her, with the reflec-

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tions of a man; when he smelt chypre he was near her again, with the tremors of a boy.

Life is less consistent than fiction, even than tolerably bad fiction. "What perfume do you use?" wrote Maupassant to a correspondent whom he had not seen, but who had made him curious. Her answer—if it hadn't been "none" —would have meant more to him than it would have meant to everybody, but it might very easily have misled him. In fiction, Conrad was dimly aware that Mrs. Adaile and chypre would never have been associated; it wasn't faint enough, fresh enough; it wasn't matutinal enough for Mrs. Adaile; to one who had not seen her it could never be evocative. Yet—perhaps it had been a passing fancy, even an experiment—in some days that were immortal to him chypre had been her scent.

The piece became funny by-and-by, and he began to listen to it, but though the sensations wakened by the lady's handkerchief subsided, the memories did no more than doze. Between the acts, and when he left the theatre, they beset him with full force. As he strolled to the club, he surrendered to them. He had recalled Mrs. Adaile so often, so often re-enacted scenes with her, and mocked himself that he had not played them differently, that the episode seemed to him

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by no means so remote as it was; it seemed much closer than many episodes that had happened since. It was with a shock that in the reading-room he counted the years. Was it possible? Good heavens! how time flew. It indicates the fervour of his mood to say that when he made this reflection it had to him a sense of novelty.

Then she must be—Again "Good heavens!" That girl! For she had been but a girl, although she was married and he had felt himself a child beside her. He remembered the afternoon when she came to the hotel and he told his people that "the most beautiful woman he had ever seen" had just arrived. Well, she figured still as one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. But was that twenty years ago?

What a babe he had been! And he used to believe himself sapient for his age. . . . Well, perhaps in some things! How stupid he must have seemed to her for a boy of seventeen! Yet she used to confide in him on the terrace. He could not have seemed so stupid to her after all? . . . Innocent.

That night on the terrace—always the terrace, it appeared!—when she let him hold her hand, and bent her face to him, saying, "A mosquito has bitten me on the cheek—look." As if it were yesterday he could remember how his heart

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pounded, and the fatuous words he muttered in his tight throat. He wished forcefully now that he had had the courage! What atom of difference would it make to-day? Yet he did wish that he had had the courage. O imbecile! . . . But how exquisite it all was; if it could only come over again!

There were no more than two men besides himself in the room; one of them was reading, and the other slept. The silence was absolute until a page sped in to bawl the name of a member who wasn't there, and sped forth to bawl for him somewhere else. The man who had slept said "damn" very softly, and turned to sleep on the other side.

Conrad lay back in the deep chair, and let fancy reign. There were many gaps, but there were moments that made the calendar unreal. He remembered intimately things that she had said to him—oddly enough, more of the things that he had said to her. He stared at his whisky-and-potash, and mentally relived the story. And this is the story he relived:—

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CHAPTER IX

THE boy came to the French windows paint-smeared and tired. He had been to Bonsecours, where the monument of Jeanne d'Arc is now, and tried to make a study of the landscape from the Cemetery. On the boat—they had no dream of electric trams then—the immensity of his failure had filled him with alarm. A tall, slight woman was standing in the salon, with her back to him. She wore a pale coloured travelling coat, and a hat with a wing in it. As his step sounded on the terrace she turned, and he forgot the landscape. He passed awkwardly, and was troubled afterwards by the thought that he should have bowed.

He said to his mother: "The most beautiful woman you ever saw is downstairs; I wonder if she means to stay."

"She *is* staying," answered his mother. "She's Grice Adaile's wife—the man who made that speech in the House the other day. Well, is Bonsecours worth going to?"

"Rather!" he said. He was still thinking of the woman's delicate, wistful face.

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He thought of it while he dressed for dinner. He had thought of nothing latterly but that he would be studying art in Paris soon, had wished for nothing but to escape before his parents could withdraw their consent. All at once he would have regretted to learn that he was leaving suddenly.

At table she was opposite him; she sat next to Miss McGuire. He perceived that they were friends and was dismayed, for Miss McGuire considered that he had been impertinent to her and no longer spoke to him. He recognised blankly that the beautiful woman would be told he was a cub.

If he had done wrong his punishment had overtaken him: Mrs. Adaile vouchsafed no word to him for days. Her disapproval humbled him so much that he used to leave the salon when she was laughing with his mother and the rest. He hoped she would observe he was humiliated, and be stirred with pity; it seemed to him he must awaken her respect by the course he was adopting. Incongruously there was an element of unacknowledged joy in his distress; it was not without its exultation, to think that Mrs. Adaile was being heartless to him, to feel that she was making him suffer.

But it was with thanksgiving that he heard

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of Miss McGuire's wish that he would apologise; she had forbidden him to address her. He followed her from the dining-room, and begged her pardon in the hall. She replied: "You're a nice boy really; I'm so glad you've said you're sorry." He wanted to tell her that he appreciated her kindness, but he could only falter, and grip her hand. It discomfited him to know that he was blushing.

In the afternoon he was sitting on the terrace, with a sketching-block on his knees, and Mrs. Adaile came out through the windows. She sauntered to and fro. He couldn't lift his eyelids when she approached, but each time he listened, tense with the frou-frou of her skirt. All his consciousness was strung to the question whether she would stop.

"May I look?" she said.

The sensation was in his chest—he felt as if his chest had gone. She stood there, amused by his symptoms, for two or three minutes, and moved away. He was incredibly excited, boundlessly happy until he began to think of the better answers that he might have made. Visions of the evening and the morrow dazzled him; it was not the same scene to him, not the same sky. It does not take a woman six days to create a world for any man.

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By the end of the week he talked to her often and freely. At the end of a fortnight:

"I used to be afraid you'd never say anything at all to me," he owned.

"I thought you weren't very nice," she said.

"Miss McGuire told you things about me?"

"She told me as soon as you apologised to her, too. I was pleased you did that, even if you weren't in the wrong."

"Wouldn't you ever have taken any notice of me if I hadn't?"

"I did notice you," she smiled.

"Did you? But 'ever spoken to me,' I mean?"

"I don't know. We shouldn't have been such good friends as we are. I've never liked any boy as I like you, Con."

He ached to tell her how infinitely grateful he felt, but he couldn't find a word. They walked up and down together. Perhaps she understood. On a sudden he thought how cruel it was that the end would come when he went to Paris, or when she went to England. In that moment instinct taught the lad as remorselessly as experience teaches man. He *knew* that their friendship was the merest incident to her, and the hurtfulness of the knowledge squeezed his throat.

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"If we meet again one day, you'll give me a stiff little bow and pass by," he blurted.

"Con!" she murmured. "Why, I've become chummier here with you in a little while than I am with people I've known at home for years."

Still instinct was heavy in the boy.

He always spent the morning out of doors with his brushes; soon he found himself restless during the morning, impatient to return to the hotel. And he did not know he was in love with her. It did not occur to him as possible he could be in love with her. He had absolutely no suspicion.

It was still more extraordinary because he had so often thought he was in love, and gloried in being so; when we are very young, half the pleasure of being miserable about a girl consists of exciting comment and pretending to be offended by it. Yet no idea of falling in love with Mrs. Adaile had crossed his mind. Perhaps it was because she was married. Perhaps it was because he was for the first time really in love.

Through most of the stages the boy went without an inkling of his complaint. One day his father said to him, "You've caught it very badly, Con," and laughed a warning. The boy was startled. He went away bewildered, and asked himself if it was true. When Mrs. Adaile sat

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with him on the terrace that night he was self-conscious and husky. For once her presence was scarcely welcome. It rather frightened him, though he would have died sooner than admit the shameful word to himself.

Afterwards he did not know how it came to pass, but she used to confide to him that her husband wasn't very kind to her. He was in London, and she sighed when she referred to going home. Her sighs were very plaintive, and her self-pity was sincere, but it was nothing to the pity that overwhelmed the boy.

"People don't guess how unhappy I am," she said to him one evening.

"I wish I were a woman," he muttered; "I can never tell you how sorry I am for you, and if I were a woman I could put my arms round you, and you'd know!"

It was a beautiful thing to say; but he said it badly, because he felt it too much to make it effective. No woman should deride a boy's love. It is grotesque, but it is grotesque only because it is so genuine. He has not learnt yet to trick the truth out. He does not know yet that before one could make converts to the very truths of God they had to be presented with art.

"Have you any idea when you're to go?" she

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inquired. He was to travel with a friend, who was visiting in England.

"I may get a letter any day."

"Are you in a hurry?"

"No."

"I thought you were?"

He was dumb.

"I've been quite loyal to you—I haven't said a word of what I think to your people when they've talked of you."

"I knew you wouldn't. It only needs a word to make them back out."

"I wouldn't let you go if *I* were your mother. Supposing I did spoil it all for you? How you'd hate me!"

"No, I shouldn't," he said.

"Why? Have you changed your mind, then —don't you want to go after all?"

"I shouldn't hate you, because I couldn't hate you whatever you did," he explained, haltingly. "Yes, of course I want to go, but—but I don't want to go yet."

They sat down, and there was a pause. In the pause, his consciousness of her presence grew queerly acute, almost painful.

"What's the scent you've got on?" he asked, unsteadily.

"Chypre," she said; "do you like it?"

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She played with a ring she wore, and showed it to him. He touched the ring—and in a tumult of the spirit was holding her hand. They sat silent again. He knew that he ought to say something, that she was waiting for him to say something, that his long silence was ludicrous—and he could think of nothing to say. He was at once tremulous with joy and faint with fear—the fear that she would withdraw her hand before his effort had wrenched out words.

She withdrew it. He gazed before him blankly. When he was a man and recalled that evening, he wondered whether the atmosphere had seemed so much a part of his emotion at the time as it did in looking back. He wondered whether, in his heart-throbs and his sickness, he had been acutely conscious of the black shrubs in the moonlight, of all the soft sounds and odours that stole up on the air. He thought not. Yet long after her features, which he tried to visualise, were misty to him, he could still see clearly the position that the two chairs had occupied, could have sketched the terrace almost with the accuracy of a plan, and felt the night air of Rouen in his throat.

Presently she said:

"The head-waiter thinks some people who

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came from Italy must have brought the mosquitoes in their luggage."

"Oh?" said the boy.

"I believe this is a mosquito bite on my cheek. Look!"

She turned her cheek, and leant forward. He leant forward too. Her face had never been so close to him; his fingers craved its softness—he only realised that, with courage, he might touch it with a finger. And the courage was not there!

"My hand is cold," he said, hoarsely. And afterwards, too, he used to wonder whether he had been excusing his cowardice to himself, or to her.

And yet it was with no abashment that he tramped his bedroom later. It was with an exaltation that panted for vast solitudes. The whirl of the unexpected was in his being. The marvel of her hand, the marvel that she had let him hold her hand, uplifted him beyond belief. And through all the turbulence of his pulses and his mind there was not a carnal thought, not an instant's base imagining. He adored her without desire, without reflection, without asking what he adored.

When he was alone with her once more during some minutes he tried, trembling, to examine the ring again.

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"No," she said gently; "it's wrong!"

And in the next few days nothing happened, one day was like another.

Then the date of his departure was settled. He looked for her as soon as he read the news, sought her dismayed because he was to go, and twice unhappy because on his last evening she would be out. She was shopping, and he met her at the corner of the rue Thiers, where the horlogerie is.

"I'm going," he said; "and my pal can't stay here!"

"Is it fixed?" Her eyes were startled. He had never known her eyes were quite so blue.

"Yes, he's travelling at night, and won't break the journey. I'm to be at the station."

At six in the morning he was to be at the station—the next morning but one. The train reaches Rouen at an earlier hour now, but the service was a tidal one then. When she had scanned the letter neither of them spoke for—it seemed to him a long time. They had crossed the road into the Solférino Garden, and he stood beside her with his hands thrust in his jacket pockets, staring at the little lake.

"So we shall soon be saying 'good-bye,'" she said at last.

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He nodded miserably. "To-morrow evening about nine o'clock."

"Why so early?"

"Have you forgotten you're going to a dance with Miss McGuire to-morrow? *I* didn't forget; I thought of it directly I saw the date. What time shall you begin to dress?"

"You don't know me very well, Con, after all!"

His heart leapt; he pretended not to understand.

"Don't I?" he asked; "why not?"

"How could you think I'd go out on your last night here?"

"You won't go? . . . Oh, Mrs. Adaile!"

And as they moved away under the horse-chestnut blossom, it was less dreadful to him that he was going to leave her.

Why did she do it? It could not have been to test her power over him; it could not have been to wound him wantonly. Who shall say why she did it! Often a woman is unable to define her motive to herself. Two men came into the hotel after dinner—acquaintances both—and she became engrosed by them, and sent up little peals of laughter, and seemed to like their admiration, which was presumptuously barefaced. He sat tongue-tied in a corner, unwittingly providing

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equal entertainment for other women in the room. Though she knew he was suffering, she threw no glance to him. And that evening the boy entered on another stage—the stage of jealousy.

The fires of jealousy are always horrible, and there is none they ravage more fiercely than the lad whose torture we find comic. There is none, because no man, nor woman, nor young girl in such a pass, is so defenceless as a lad; to none other, when love is outraged, does nature forbid even an aspect of dignity. His deepest emotions have an air of sulks. Goading him to perpetual blunders is his inkling of a right course which he is unable to discover, and his torments are intensified by his knowledge that beside his suave rival he looks a lout.

After a clock had struck many times, "She makes herself too cheap," Mrs. Van Buren said *sotto voce,* and madame de Lavardens assented by a grimace. The boy overheard, and got up, and wandered away. A new misery tightened his throat, and burned behind his eyeballs. She had been disdained! his world rocked. He was degraded, vicariously—for her sake, degraded that his Ideal should afford these people the opportunity to disparage her. Resentment beat in him; he longed to vindicate, to lay down his life for her—and knew himself a cipher, and that the

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tempest in his soul would be thought ridiculous. Disdained! It was paramount, bitterest. The humiliation of neglect dwindled; all his pain, all his consciousness was the hurricane of humiliation that he felt for *her*.

"If you weren't so young I should think you were trying to insult me, Conrad. Please don't speak to me any more," she said next morning, when he had made tactless, seventeen-year-old reproaches to her.

Her voice and gaze were cold, as if he were a stranger. She rose and left him. The grace of the slender figure had no mercy in it as he watched. The sun was streaming, and the birds chirped loud, and he thought his heart was broken as he watched. He sat looking the way that she had gone for long after the terrace was bare. And heavy hours passed emptily. And still he was bereft. And it was his last day here.

Half of it was lost when wretchedness waylaid her at a door. "I'm sorry," he gulped. She bent her head, and moved by him without speaking. In the group about the tea-table she was no gentler. The glare of sunshine mellowed. His father claimed him, and talked with unusual earnestness of ambition and of life; his mother wrapt his arm about her waist, and was pathetic and confident by turn. In the chatter of the

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salon he heard that Mrs. Adaile was going to the dance. From herself he had still no word nor look. The flush in the sky faded. A relentless star peered forth. And it was his last day here!

She went. Until the final minutes he could not feel that she would go, could not believe it until he saw her in the triumphant cruelty of her ball gown with the lilies at her dazzling breast—saw her giddily with the long gloves and the fan in her hands.

The room was full of animation, of movement. The boy sat mute, his gaze fastened on her face. The fiacre grated to the curb. Miss McGuire asked her if she was ready. "Yes, I'm ready." Colonel Van Buren put the cape about her shoulders. She turned carelessly, her hand outstretched: "Well, I'll say 'good-bye,' Con; you've all my good wishes!" "Good-bye, Mrs. Adaile," he faltered. His eyes implored her, but her touch was fleeting. The fiacre rattled—she had gone.

And upon the hotel fell a profound and deathly silence. He heard nothing. Deaf he was, and blind.

He had seen her for the last time. He kept saying it. It seemed unreal—an impossible thing—though the harrowing of it was so actual.

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His mind wouldn't seize it, even while the weight of it was grinding his youth.

For the last time! Outside, he bit hard upon his nether lip, to check its silly quivering. A myriad stars glittered over Rouen now; a breeze was blowing across the river. There was the roll of wheels approaching. Foolish as he knew the hope to be, he held his breath till they rolled past. At the piano Miss Digby-Smith was playing Ascher's variations of "Alice." His mother joined him, and sat there with him—and scarcely spoke. She took his hand. He thought she didn't guess.

"It's late, Con," she said at last. "Hadn't you better go to bed?"

"I'm not tired," said the boy.

"You'll come to my room as soon as you're dressed in the morning?"

"You won't be able to go to sleep again."

"I want you to. Your father's going to the station with you, do you know?"

"Yes, he told me . . . What time"—the indifference of his tone!—"what time do you think Miss McGuire and—er—Mrs. Adaile will be back?"

"Not for hours yet," she said; "I daresay it will be three or four o'clock." She looked away from him. He thought she didn't guess!

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Presently the lights were turned out. People said "good-night," and bade him "good-bye." But for very shame he would have sat alone in the salon till it was time for him to start—sat there just to see the woman pass through the hall.

In bed he listened, he lay in the darkness holding his breath again. He wanted to hear her come home—to hear her would be something. The wind was rising, and alternately it ricked and terrorised him—he trembled lest a gust should drown the faint stir of her return. It was a long, long while that he had listened. Sleep pressed upon his eyelids, but he would not yield. Once it was mastering him, and he twitched to wide wakefulness in the guilty fear that he had missed her.

The blustering wind, and the clock of St. Ouen made the only sounds.

He saw the door opening with the dim notion that he was being called too soon. For a mere vague moment, which seemed dishonour to him in the next, he beheld without realising her. He raised himself slowly on his elbows—and it thrilled through him that she was moving to his side.

"I've come to say 'good-bye' to you, Con."

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"Mrs. Adaile!" The name was all that he could whisper. "Oh, Mrs. Adaile!"

"I've been horrid to you. Haven't I?"

"No, no," he said strenuously, "it was I; I want to beg your pardon. Forgive me! Oh, you do forgive me, don't you? It's been awful."

Her hands were swift and live; he held them fast. The ghostliness of daybreak was in the room. In the pallor she sat at the edge of the bed, the ball gown wan, and the faded lilies drooping at her breast. Being so young, he was shy that his hair was on end and the collar of his night-shirt crumpled.

"I'm sorry," she said; "I've been sorry all the night."

Her penitence started his tears, and blinking couldn't keep them back. He wanted to smear them away, but he didn't want to let go her hands. He turned his head. He was ashamed—but less ashamed than he would have expected—that she should see him blub.

"Don't!" she said, and he had never heard that note before. "You'll make me hate myself."

"I love you," he exclaimed, "I love you."

"Shh! You mustn't say that, Con," she murmured.

"I love you, I love you," cried the boy.

"I know," she said, "I know you do."

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And, wonderfully, there was nothing wonderful to his mind that he had owned it to her. At the instant there was nothing but perfect peace.

"You've made me so happy," he breathed.

Afterwards that sounded to her a little funny, but as she heard him say it she thought it only strange and beautiful. Something tenderer than liking, something graver came into her gaze as she looked down at him.

"I've not been a nice woman to you, Con," she said. "One day you'll think so."

"I shall never think so," he vowed, "never. I deserve you should punish me."

But that wasn't what she had meant. "You *will* think so." She nodded. "Only you won't mind then, because you'll laugh at it all."

"You're cruel," he choked. "Because I'm not a man you think I can't love you really. No man could love you better than I do. If I could only tell you what I feel! I'd die for you, I'd do anything for you. Oh, Mrs. Adaile, I shall never see you any more—for God's sake let me kiss you once!"

Quick as her compassion was, the misgiving of a boy was quicker—in the dizzy second that he saw her stooping to him he wondered how he ought to hold her. Then her bosom fell upon

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his breathlessness and he went to heaven against her lips.

"I must go," she said, freeing herself.

"Oh, don't," he begged, "not yet."

"I must; I oughtn't to have come up."

"What shall I do?" he groaned. "Oh, it's awful to be leaving you!"

"I wish I hadn't made you fond of me!" she sighed.

"You didn't; you couldn't help it. But what shall I do? My life's no good to me; I shall be thinking of you, and longing for you when you've forgotten all about me."

She smoothed the ruffled hair.

"Think of me sometimes when you've got over it," she said; "think of me when you're going to do anything that isn't worthy of you now."

"I shall be true to you as long as I live," said the boy, understanding. "Mrs. Adaile——"

It was odd to her ear that he called her that a moment after she had been in his arms. "What?" she asked.

"When you go down to breakfast, I shall be in Paris."

"Yes," she said.

"Shall you read the papers by the window this morning?"

"Do you want me to?"

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"Yes—I should be able to know where you were."

"I will then!"

"I shall be imagining you all the time. . . . What shall you do this evening?"

"Reproach myself," she said.

"No, you mustn't; what for? Will you think of me?"

"Yes. After dinner I'll go on the terrace, Con, and I'll sit there alone, wondering what you're doing, and thinking of—just now. And —well, perhaps I'll say a little prayer for you. I *must* go now. Say 'good-bye' to me."

"I can't," he gasped, "I can't."

"Con, I must!"

"Give me something," he stammered, "give me something you've got on!"

She broke off a handful of the flowers they had crushed; she took his strained face between her palms, and kissed him twice—once on the lips, and, by impulse, on the brow. Then she opened the door cautiously. She smiled back at him, and stole away into the passage. And in the loneliness she left behind her, the boy lay kissing her lilies, and sobbing with his great despair.

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CHAPTER X

Across twenty years a man made an obeisance to a woman for risking what she had risked that she might comfort a boy's pain. Conrad got up from the club chair and crossed over to the bookcase. He pulled out the Post Office Directory—and it sprawled open on the top shelf. Would he find the name under "A"? . . . "Grice Ewart Adaile, M.P., 62 Norfolk Street, Park Lane." And she? Was she alive? could she be there, so close to him as that?

He mourned to think how different she must be to-day. The woman had changed, and the boy had changed, and though he didn't know it, the town had changed the most. The ubiquitous rush and whir of electric trams, the ceaseless clangour of their bells beating through the brain, had turned peace into a pandemonium. Rouen had acquired all the noise of New York without any of its gaiety. Telegraph wires and telephone wires spanned the tops of the churches, and a mesh-work of iron ropes obscured the sky.

He strolled to Norfolk Street the next after-

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noon. There was a half hope in his mind of finding a carriage at the door waiting to take the lady for her drive. If Mrs. Adaile came out—Oh, if Mrs. Adaile came out he would be well repaid; it would be exciting to recognise her, although she wouldn't recognise him!

But she did not come out. The door was shut fast, and no familiar face happened to gaze pensively over the window boxes. He was disappointed. In the evening he went to another theatre. The hero of the comedy was supposed to be a man of his own age, and talked about himself as if he were a centenarian. He said he was thirty-seven and had "lived his life," and he called the heroine "Child." His hair was silvered at the temples, and he depressed Conrad exceedingly.

The situation of Norfolk Street was so convenient, however, that Conrad took to passing through it rather often. And though he was old enough to know better, he certainly looked young enough to be the hero's son. One day he found the windows of No. 62 blank behind shutters. So the family had left town! He sauntered on, and hesitated, and went back. Here was an opportunity to ascertain what he wanted to know. He rang the bell, and asked a solemn

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functionary when Mrs. Adaile was expected home.

"I can't say, sir," said the man; "Mrs. Adaile is on the Continent."

"Oh," said Conrad, with a heart-prank. She did live! He vacillated—and obeyed a second impulse: "Can you give me Mrs. Adaile's address?"

The solemn person noted the pearl in the stranger's tie, the silk lining of the coat he unbuttoned, and the direction in which his hand was travelling. Mrs. Adaile was in Ostend. "Thenk you, sir." He named the hotel, and Conrad proceeded to Piccadilly enamoured of temptation. How tired he was of London! In any case he would go away; why shouldn't he go to Ostend? He had never been there—and he might sit next to her at dinner. It would be an absurdity of course, but——

The hero of thirty-seven with hair silvered at the temples, admonished him from every hoarding and he took a hansom to avoid his sedate contemporary's reproof. Entering the club, he walked through an avenue of decorator's ladders; the smoking-room was full of paint and pails. What could be more absurd than to remain in town?

He winced as it occurred to him that Adaile

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might have been married twice. Supposing the "Mrs. Adaile" in Ostend proved to be a stranger, an unfamiliar person profaning a hallowed name? How complete a fool he would feel when he arrived! But he would not dwell on that contingency. "Far fetched," he said. Even a fate that showered disappointments as freely as if they were confetti must draw the line somewhere.

He was among the tourists, and the luggage-thieves at Charing Cross by ten o'clock next morning. When he reached Ostend it was a fine afternoon, and the town was baking. By comparison London had been pleasant, so a multitude of Londoners had flocked to Ostend. With trepidation he beheld the hotel that sheltered her —what if he were unable to obtain a room in it? But no—so far, so good. Fate was, perhaps, napping in the heat—a room was to be had. He washed his face in No. 17 victoriously, and overlooked the scarlet geraniums, and the Faience fountain, glistening in a grass plot, and the red-striped sun umbrellas that sprouted through the little tables. Nobody was visible among the basket chairs. A starling's twittering in a lilac bush was the only voice. The number of his room chimed with his mood—a happy coincidence. To the manager's mind, at least, he was

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"seventeen" again. Again he stood in an hotel bedroom preparing to join her downstairs! Had she changed *very* much?

Presently he wandered into the salon, and lounged round the reading-room. Everywhere it was unpromisingly quiet. A hint of siesta pervaded the hotel. Should he go out? He sauntered through the hall, but the dazzle of the Digue blistering in the glare made his eyes ache. He went back to the shade, and ruffled newspapers, and smoked cigarettes. A child came into the scorching courtyard that was called a "garden," and hopped round on one leg, and said to another child, "Can *you* do that?" The starling twittered imperturbably. Who said Ostend was gay?

Benighted male! the women weren't asleep, they were all changing their frocks again. When he woke he had missed one of the sights of the day —the "creations" that vied with one another between the hours of five and seven. A gong was booming. Only the first gong. Good! There was time for him to dress before the room began to fill. He sought the head-waiter, and inquired if a place facing the door could be arranged. The head-waiter had house property, and two sons at college, but he was the urbanest of head-waiters. A novice tips the servants when he leaves

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an hotel, and, if he is a generous novice, pays for attention that he hasn't received; a traveller of experience tips them when he arrives, and gets the liver wing and a seat by the window.

The second gong was still reverberating when No. 17 descended to dinner. The urbanest of head-waiters hovered on the threshold. For scrutinising the company Conrad had scarcely time to glance at the menu. The doorway was as dazzling as the Digue had been: a cinematograph of toilettes, a succession of audacities—only clusters of diamonds seemed to keep some of the bodices up. Man formed a shifting background to an exhibition of jewels, a pageant of skirts and breasts. Still more gowns. The humming room was the apotheosis of Clothes—until the women sat down, and then it was the apotheosis of Bosom.

She came in late. She wore white satin, embroidered in silver, and a "collar" of emeralds. He recognised her at once. There was no hesitation in his mind—he had expected to hesitate—he knew her the instant she appeared. She had altered certainly—even pathetically; the girl of twenty years ago was lost; but in the flash of the moment the difference in her face startled him less than the difference in her figure. A shade too stout. Yes, a shade too stout for his

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taste! And—and *had* her hair been copper colour in Rouen?

But a pretty woman, nobody could deny it. She didn't look a day more than thirty-five—might pass for thirty now the rose glow of the lamps was on her! . . . Well—almost!

Her table was well in view. She was with another woman—perhaps younger, a brunette, vivacious—and an elderly man with projecting teeth, and eyes like a fish. Adaile? How grotesque he must have looked making love! He had a nose as long as the one in Blake's portrait of the man who built the Pyramids. And he used to be unkind to her!—one could read that he was a cold-blooded, unappreciative stick. . . . Now he was talking to her. On second thoughts, perhaps he wasn't her husband—he displayed the projecting teeth to her in so many smiles. The other woman's husband then! Quite a good chap in his way, no doubt; he was doing them very well in the matter of wine.

Would there be a chance to speak to her to-night? Abominably hard lines if he had to wait till to-morrow, but he wanted to find her alone—in the garden, for preference, in the moonlight. . . . No—no—thirty-five; but no more, not an hour. How beautiful she *used to be!* She didn't know she was sitting in the room with a man

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she had kissed. Rather an amusing reflection that! . . . Scores of men in the room, though; perhaps she did. How sick he would have felt to think so once! Where was the splendid jealousy he ought to feel this evening?

> "'Dead as the bulrushes round little Moses
> On the old banks of the Nile!'"

He made his coffee last till the party got up, and then followed them to the salon. The salon did not keep them—they drifted to the hall. They disappeared. The hall was a bevy of women who had been upstairs to put on hats, and were desiring to be taken to the Kursaal. "Poppa" was in constant demand. Conrad observed that all the family men seemed inclined to loll where they were, and that all the unaccompanied men made sprightly departures. In the concert-room he found her again, but he didn't find his opportunity. To be sure, he had hardly expected one there. Still he felt rather hipped the last thing at night as he sat among a crowd and the popping of champagne corks in a buffet where the casks were utilised as seats, and the ladies' toilettes were as gorgeous—and as modest—as the ladies' toilettes in the hotel.

In the morning he met her coming back from

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the sands with an enormous sunshade, in the "early bath" costume; and he met her later wearing a picture hat in the "after bath" costume: also he saw her in the costume she put on when *dejeuner* was over—and still she was unapproachable. If she proved too elusive, he'd be tempted to swim after her next day and try his luck in the water. But could he be sentimental with his hair dripping? And even in Ostend it wouldn't be—Oh, in the wrong key altogether!

She was scribbling on a picture postcard at one of the little writing tables, and there was nobody else there.

"May I remind Mrs. Adaile that I have had the happiness of being presented to her?"

She turned her head, and there was approval in the lady's gaze. There was, however, not a scintilla of recognition in it.

"My name is Warrener," he said.

"Oh yes," she murmured; "I'm so short-sighted—how d'ye do?" But he saw that she was twenty years away from knowing who he was.

"This is tremendously nice of you," he exclaimed; "I was afraid you wouldn't remember me."

"How absurd," she said perfunctorily. "Why shouldn't I? We met at——?"

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"But so long ago. I *was* afraid, really. I've been warning myself that you couldn't be expected to remember—and yet I knew I should be so pained if you forgot."

She made a little amiable movement of her hands. He understood it to signify that his doubts had done injustice to them both. Inwardly he laughed.

"Is your husband in Ostend, Mrs. Adaile?"

"No," she said, "no, he's in the Tyrol—Innsbruck. I'm here with my sister and my brother-in-law. You know them, don't you?"

"No, I've never had the pleasure. They weren't with you there."

"Ah, no," she said, "no, they weren't. . . . Ostend is very dull this year, don't you think?"

"I've found it very exciting; I saw you yesterday at dinner, and I've been trying to meet your eyes ever since."

"Really?" said the lady. She allowed him to meet them, and looked away, her expression vacillating between a pucker and a smile.

"My courage wasn't equal to risking a snub from you publicly, and you were never alone. You balked me last night, you escaped me this morning, and you drove me to desperation this afternoon. I ought to have known you wouldn't forget, but I always had misgivings, hadn't I?"

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"Had you?" she said. The pucker was getting the upper hand. She played with the post-card.

"Confess!" said Conrad.

"I remember you perfectly," she insisted with transparent hypocrisy, "but just for the moment I'm fogged where it was we met."

"Will it help you if I mention Normandy?"

"Normandy?" she echoed vaguely.

"Rouen—the Hôtel Britannique—a boy who was called 'Con.'"

"Con?" she cried. And the smile had things all its own way with her; for an instant the spirit of his youth flashed so close that he nearly captured it. "You are 'Con'?"

"Still," he affirmed earnestly. "And *you* are still—'Mrs. Adaile.'"

"You are Con," she repeated, wondering; "that boy! And did you remember me directly you saw me last night?"

"No—I've remembered you all the time."

"Ah," she laughed reproval, "what a long while ago that makes it seem!—the boy never told me pretty falsehoods."

"The boy never told you half the truth; he was a very backward boy."

"If we are to be friends you mustn't run him down, Mr. Warrener," she said; "I was very

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fond of Con. . . . 'Rouen!' Have you ever been there since?"

"No; I was abroad for years—out of Europe, I mean."

"You were going to be an artist?"

"I hoped to be."

"Aren't you?"

"No; I haven't the artist's temperament—I'm too faithful."

She regarded the postcard on the table again, and he did justice to her eyelashes.

"Ostend is going down dreadfully, isn't it?" she remarked. "All the ridiculous people who have just got titles have brought them here. We're leaving on Thursday."

He sighed.

"Don't be foolish," she said, not too flippantly.

"Ah," said Conrad now, "what a long while ago that makes it seem!—the boy was not told he was foolish."

"No one could be so unkind to him—and he wasn't."

"You'll make me jealous of that boy before you've done. Don't you believe you could?"

"I don't know what you mean," she declared.

"You used to take *him* seriously."

"Oh yes, we were capital friends."

"Did he deserve your friendship more than I?"

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"You're absurd," she smiled. Her eyes were as blue as they had been in the Solférino Garden. He looked into them, wishing he could feel the despair that had been his that radiant morning.

"Is a wretched boy you only knew for a few weeks to be privileged above a man who has thought of you for years?" Within an ace he had said for "twenty years," but the blunder was nipped in time.

"You mean 'hours,'" she said. "We dined last night at eight o'clock—it's just four now."

"You don't believe me—you think I'm making the most of a happy accident? What if I gave you a conclusive, an overwhelming proof?"

"A proof of what?"

"Of what? That I am constancy itself. Supposing I told you that my only reason for coming here was to see you again. What would you say to that?"

"I hope I should answer quite politely," she murmured.

"Ah, you didn't doubt me once!" he exclaimed with grave reproach.

"You didn't tell such tarra-diddles once," she urged.

"I came here simply and solely to see you. Look at me. Will you give me your hand?—

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I want to repeat it solemnly." She glanced at the door, and yielded him her hand. It was very soft and agreeable to hold; he continued with no undue haste: "Now, holding your hand, and with my eyes meeting yours, I say that I came here to see you—for no one, and nothing else—that I had no idea of coming to the place till I knew you were here. That isn't all!" he detained her hand gently. "For an age I have been trying to see you. I knew none of your friends—it was awfully difficult for me. Could I call upon you and begin 'Once upon a time'? Should I write to you? You might read my note in the wrong mood. Oh, I tell you I racked my brains! That isn't all!"—her hand had been retreating again. "The day before yesterday as I passed your house—No. 62; you have window boxes, the flowers are calceolarias and marguerites this season—the day before yesterday as I passed, I saw the shutters were closed. I rang the bell. I deceived your servant, I led him to imagine you—you would be glad to welcome me. I wormed your address from him and threw myself onto the boat rejoicing. That isn't all——"

She drew the hand free, nevertheless, and realising that it wasn't coming back to him yet, he

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concluded, "But it is enough to show you that you've been cruel."

At this moment they were interrupted, and she said, "Oh, let me—Mr. Warrener, my sister, Lady Bletchworth."

"How d'ye do," said Lady Bletchworth. "Ostend is very dull this year, don't you think?"

"I've just said that," Mrs. Adaile told her.

"It doesn't matter," said Lady Bletchworth. "It's a very good opening remark, and I make it to everybody."

"Won't you put me up to the correct answer?" asked Conrad; "I've only just come, and I should like to catch the tone."

"Most of them say, 'Oh, my *dear!*'" she replied; "but our latest novelty is, '*South*end! what?'"

"Mr. Warrener's people and I used to be very chummy ages ago," said Mrs. Adaile. "I am afraid to inquire, Mr. Warrener?"

"No," he said, "I—I am alone."

"He was quite nice in those days," she added to her sister.

"What has spoilt you, Mr. Warrener?"

"I find my world so sceptical, Lady Bletchworth."

"Not here," she said; "they can even believe Ostend is smart. Can you do a sum? If 'it

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takes three generations to make a gentleman,' how many shops does it take to make a knight?"

"One: England," said Conrad.

"I don't believe he's spoilt, after all, Joan," said Lady Bletchworth. "There's hope for him yet."

"It's much too early to say *that*," murmured Mrs. Adaile. But the glance she cast at him was not discouraging.

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CHAPTER XI

THE rest of the afternoon promised nothing, so Conrad bought "Le Marquis de Priola" to kill time. It passed away so peacefully that he was surprised when he found it was dead.

After dinner he saw the two women on a lounge, and they moved their skirts for him, and commented on the visitors. There was the Earl of Armoury, wearing a stud as big as a brooch, and a malmaison the size of a saucer. He could swing his watch into his waistcoat pocket, and make the most killing grimaces. To hear him sing "Pip, pip! the Lodger and the Twins" was to realise that he could have held his own in vulgarity with many a professional "turn." As everybody knows, the Duke of Merstham married Flossie Coburg from the music-halls; the heir had inherited his mother's gift. "The best of it," said Lady Bletchworth, "is that his mother herself has become too prim for words since she has been respectable. She asks bishops to dinner, and does her hair in plain bands. Heredity is her cross! Oh," she went on, "you'll meet all

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the world and his wife—Ostend-sibly. A man brought his wife to the hotel last week, and when he went upstairs to bed she wasn't there. After he had searched for her high and low he went to the bureau and asked if the clerk could tell him where she was. The clerk couldn't, but said that a married lady had just been to him in a fix—she didn't know the number of her room, and had forgotten the name of her husband. Please don't smile, I was terribly shocked myself."

Conrad didn't say that the story was not original, and had been told about town six months before.

Then Lord Bletchworth drifted to them, and was tedious. Lord Bletchworth twaddled ponderously. He considered there was a lot of disgraceful bosh being printed about the Service, and the Country at large, in the papers just now. "My dear sir, an Englishman who had the interests of England at heart would hold his tongue while she slid down hill, and silently watch her bump to the bottom." That wasn't how he put it, but it was the gist of what he said. He added that the battle of Waterloo had been won on the playing fields of Eton, and he seemed as satisfied with Waterloo as if it were in the Transvaal.

However, he had his uses—he walked with his

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wife when they went to the Kursaal, and left Conrad with Mrs. Adaile.

"How quiet you've become," she said.

"I am asking myself what to say to you."

"Do you find me so hard to talk to?"

"I find you so hard to convince."

"Why try to convince me?"

"Why did I come to Ostend?"

"Oh, that was a pretty tale," she said. "It wasn't true, really, was it?"

"You know it was true. I've looked forward to meeting you again for years. I can't tell you how fond I was of you. You're the only woman I've ever cared for."

"You were a child."

"And now I'm a man—doesn't that show, doesn't it prove? Is it nothing to think of a woman so long as I've thought of you? What other man could say to you what *I* can say?"

"But you *mustn't* say it," she smiled—it cannot be written that she "forbade."

"Is your life so full," he asked, "that you have no room for my love?"

"Mr. Warrener, but really——"

"You hurt me," he said. "What have I done since we parted, to become 'Mr. Warrener' to you?"

"Are we going to sit on the terrace," said

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Lord Bletchworth, looking back, "or are we going inside? Mr. Warrener, you play, perhaps?"

"No," said Conrad, "I haven't played here. I don't care much about it anyhow."

"Let's sit down outside," said Lady Bletchworth. "It's so hot in there."

On the terrace it was very agreeable. The orchestra did not sound too insistent, and they found chairs where they could watch the people promenade without being inconvenienced by them. Extremes meet, and Ostend is their meeting-place. Only a light railing divides the fashionable world and the half world from the world that works. On one side plod a humble flock of wearied trippers, who have had tea "As nice as mother makes it," in a sweltering shop at the back of the town. Among the shell pin-cushions, the franc souvenirs, they have had tea. All the evening they pass and repass with flagging feet, wishing they had chosen Margate. On the other side, women who were born in the same class trail Paquin's gowns. On the necks of some there are flowers that have cost as much as a tripper's holiday; a diamond in an ear is worth more than the price of a tripper's home. And Maggie from Dalston, with three tired children clinging to her ten-and-sixpenny skirt, gazes across that slender

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rail, and thinks. And her thoughts might be unpleasant to hear.

A really extraordinary thing was that no one but Conrad seemed to be aware that the railing bisected two worlds and a half. As for Conrad, his reflections engrossed him so much that he quite forgot to attend to Mrs. Adaile. Only when he chanced to notice she was looking pensive in the starlight did it occur to him that he was ignoring a situation by which he ought to be thrilled.

For here they were. The stars were twinkling, the waves were murmuring, the lady was waiting. It was true that her sister and Bletchworth were in the way, but even allowing for their presence this should mean emotion. Where was it? On the terrace while he made small talk, and on the Digue when they strolled back, and as he smoked his last cigar that night in the garden, the question in Conrad's mind was insistently "Where is the emotion?"

Because she was still an attractive woman, and he perceived it. He was even making love to her—to *her,* to Mrs. Adaile!—and she was not adamant. What had happened to him? Where were his transports, the spiritual whirlwinds, where was everything that he had travelled to recover?

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She had a whim to do fancy work in the salon next day during the hour when the women changed their déjeuner dresses for the five-o'clock-to-seven costumes. He had met her as she was passing his door—their rooms were in the same passage—and they had gone downstairs together.

"You've told me nothing of your life since we used to know each other," he said, playing with a thimble.

"What would you like me to tell you?"

"You used to tell me a good deal—if I am privileged to remember it."

"I'm afraid I did. How I must have bored you! It was rather a shame. But I was in my egotistical stage, and you listened with such big eyes—Con."

"Thank you," said Conrad. "But I wasn't bored. And you weren't an egotist—you were the sweetest woman I've ever met. I was awfully sorry for you—so sorry. Only a cub's sympathy, but you've had none truer from anyone."

"You were a nice boy—I've thought about you sometimes. Are the scissors there? Do look."

"If a woman knows when she is really loved, you should have thought about me very often,"

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he answered, giving them to her. "Are you happier than you were?"

"Let us say I don't worry so much about being unhappy. I suppose it amounts to the same thing." She sighed—and smiled. "Would you do this leaf green, or yellow?"

"I shouldn't do it at all," he said. "Put it down and talk to me. I remember once when you were telling me your troubles, you cried. It was one afternoon on the terrace; you had on a pale blue frock, and a big floppy hat. I'd have given my life to kiss you at that moment."

"You mustn't say these things to me," she faltered. She said it more gravely than on the Digue; she was not smiling now, and she lowered her eyes—he knew that he might seize her hands.

"I've waited for you so long," he exclaimed. "Joan, be kind to me!"

But his heart did not thud in her silence. He held her hands fast; the doyley that she was making had fallen to the couch.

At last she murmured, still looking down, "How can you care for me? We've only just met."

"I've cared for you ever since. If you knew how I worshipped you—if you knew what I suffered when you were vexed with me! That

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night you sat talking to those men, and the next morning when you were offended—I remember what I felt as if it were a month ago. I remember what you said as you turned away, and how I sat watching, praying that you'd come back. And then I waited at the door, and begged your pardon, and you wouldn't forgive me. I've relived it all so often. I did love you, darling, I did, I did! . . . It sounds idiotic: there was a song of yours, 'To-day, to-day our dream is over —To-day, the waking cold and grey'; I learnt to strum the refrain there to—to make me feel nearer to you when I had gone. Since I've been a man I've strummed that refrain a hundred times, and longed for you—I was strumming it years after you had forgotten you ever sang it. I've thought about you sometimes till my boyhood has been alive in me, trembling. If Faust's chance could have come to me in any year since we parted, I'd have said 'Let me be seventeen again in Rouen.' "

"The past is always beautiful. I made you very wretched, though."

"But you liked me a little. Heaven knows why!—I was a fool. Still, you did."

"Perhaps it was because you were a 'fool' that I was foolish. That's all over." She drew her hands from his clasp.

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"It isn't over," he said. "You shan't say it's over. The present may be as beautiful as the past."

She shook her head; "Can we work miracles? Can I make myself a girl again, or you a boy?"

"Yes, if you've not forgotten what you felt for me. If the memories are not all mine, you can even do that. You see I'm a fool still; I—I half hoped that you'd remember. . . . Joan, 'you were not once so wise'."

"Ah!" she said. "If I were younger now, or if you had been older then—who knows?"

"Could you sing that song still?" he asked. "Listen." He opened the piano, and played a few bars. "Can you?"

"Oh!" She forced a laugh. "It was too long ago. And what a song besides!"

"Try," he pleaded. "Try it."

"I can't remember the words," she murmured.

"The words?—

> 'You tell me, Love, that I'll forget you—
> I own it, in our last "good-bye," '

I'd be so grateful. Please!"

"How does it go on?"

"It goes on—

> 'Our dream has been too sweet to let you
> Remember that I spoke a lie.' "

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"Oh yes," she said, coming forward. She hummed. "Let me see!—

'I know the years will crowd above you,
I know despair must fade away;
But here and now I know I love you,
I love you—and we part—to-day!'

Is that it?"

"That's it; and then there's what I was playing—

'To-day, to-day our dream is over,
To-day the waking, cold and grey.'"

She nodded; "Yes, yes—

'What care I Time will—'

something, what is it?—

'The throes that rend my heart to-day?'

Well, I'll try, but I'm sure I shan't be able to. I haven't heard it for years."

Then she sat down, and began it; and he shut his eyes and tried to think he was seventeen and she was twenty.

The music stopped short. "I knew it would be a failure. It's gone. It was too long ago," she repeated.

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"It was yesterday!" he cried, and caught her in his arms as she got up.

For a second she held him back from her, regarding him curiously. Regret, tenderness, irony were mingled in the gaze she bent on him. Like him she mourned for what had perished; like him she sought to delude herself that it bloomed anew. . . . "It's absurd," she said, and drooped to him with a kiss.

As they moved apart, both were disappointed. The man thought, "I have spoilt my memory of her kiss to me in Rouen."

"I adore you," he said mechanically.

The woman's smile was enigmatic as she left him.

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CHAPTER XII

"ARE you heartless?" he continued; "have you no pity for me?"

It was the next evening. They were sitting among the basket chairs and the dinner dresses in the garden, and there was no one inconveniently near. Lady Bletchworth had gone inside a few minutes before. A warm breeze bore strains of Chopin to them from the Kursaal; the little fountain plashed languidly, and a full moon had been assisting Conrad to deceive himself.

"I am not heartless," returned Mrs. Adaile, "I am sensible. And—there are a thousand reasons."

"For one thing?"

"For one thing. . . . I don't want romance—I want comedy. I want to laugh with you, my dear Con, not to be serious."

This was difficult to answer, for he could not offer to laugh at his grand passion. He sighed.

"Besides," she went on, "I couldn't make you happy. It isn't in my power—you don't really care for me. You are in love with a memory, not

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with me. I'm no longer the woman you fell in love with. I've changed. Really I didn't know how much I had changed till you came here. I must like you very much to want to talk to you —because you make me feel elderly, you do indeed."

"You're unjust," he exclaimed—and he was genuinely distressed. "Not care for you? You don't believe it, you can't believe that. I swear to you——"

"No, don't," she said. "I can imagine all you would say. Haven't I listened to you? Haven't I even . . . tried to make illusions for myself? You talk of what you felt for me, not of what you feel. You don't know it, but you rave to me about what I was, not about what I am. You remember the hat and the frock I had on twenty years ago—can you tell me what I wore last night?"

"Is such constancy nothing?" he cried hurriedly.

"It would be irresistible," she said, "if you could find the girl that you've been constant to. But she doesn't live, Con—she's gone. *I* am such a different person from the girl you've looked for that—that I've even felt a tiny bit jealous sometimes of your rhapsodies to me about her. Well? I'm being quite frank with you, you see. It's pathetic, I think. There have

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been moments when I've listened to you and felt a little pained because you seemed to forget all about *me*. . . . I am hurting you?"

"You hurt me," said Conrad, "because for the first time I realise you *are* different from the girl I've looked for. Till now I've felt that I was with her again."

"That's nice of you, but it isn't true. Oh, I like you for saying it, of course. . . . If you had felt it really——"

"Go on."

"No, what for? I should only make you unhappier."

"You want comedy?" he demurred; "you have said the saddest things a woman ever said to me."

She raised a white shoulder—with a laugh; "I never get what I want!"

"It should have taught you to feel for me, but you are not 'wondrous kind.' "

"Oh, I am more to be pitied than you are! What have I got in my life? Friends? Yes—to play bridge with. My husband? He delivers speeches on local option, and climbs mountains. Both make me deadly tired. I used to go in for music—'God save the King' is the only tune he knows when he hears it, and he only knows that because the men take their hats off. I was interested in my house at the beginning—

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after you've quarrelled in your house every day for years it doesn't absorb you to make the mantelpiece look pretty. I wanted a child—well, my sister has seven! . . . Voilà, my autobiography up to date."

"There is to-morrow," said Conrad, moved.

"To-morrow you must give me the comedy," she smiled; "and the morning after, I go to the Highlands—and big men will shoot little birds, and think it's 'sport.' Did you ever see a sparrow die? I watched one once. It was human. Like a child. . . . Come on, come on, let's go out!"

And behold another woman! She had been wise, and dejected him; now she was unwise, to make amends. Behold a myriad women in one. Before half an hour had passed she had told him her philosophy was thistledown, that she had prated reason only to be reasoned with. And she told him so without a word about it—said so by the modulation of her voice while they talked trifles.

And Conrad? Conrad had been scrambling to the point of friendship, and he slipped back to folly. Conrad strove to forget that discomfiting phrase, "You are in love with a memory, not with me." It made the folly so difficult.

He could not succeed in forgetting it. It was

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in his mind next day, coldly a fact. Yes, he was making love to Mrs. Adaile because she was Mrs. Adaile, not because she was a charming woman. He knew that if they hadn't met before he came to Ostend, he might have admired her, tried to know her, grown to like her, but that he would never have said to her what he had said. Nor wished to say it.

Yet there *was* the regnant truth that it was she. She had the fascination of sharing with him his dearest, his sweetest remembrances; the radiance of the past still tinged her—in her keeping lay the wonder of his youth.

So they ate Neapolitan ices in the morning, and she brought down the doyley in the afternoon, and they listened to Chopin again in the evening.

It was the last evening. The Bletchworths and she were leaving early on the morrow, and he was unlikely to be alone with her again before she went.

"I wish you weren't going," he said. "How horribly I shall miss you! I shan't stop here. Why aren't you going to Homburg, instead of to people in Scotland? Then we might have met again."

"Are you going to Homburg to be 'cured'?"

"I think I shall go there. Or to Antwerp.

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Yes, I shall go to Antwerp first. I was there when I was a boy. I was happy in Antwerp."

"How funny you are," she said involuntarily.

"I've never found anyone much entertained by me. How?"

"You'll go to Antwerp, of all places in the world, because you liked it when you were a boy! Antwerp will disappoint you—too."

"You could always stab deep with a monosyllable," he said, "but you used to have more mercy."

"I'm sorry I've deteriorated," said the lady rather stiffly.

She leant back in her chair, and a minute passed in silence. She gave her attention to the orchestra, tapping time with the tip of a shoe.

"Does it amuse you to say cruel things to me?" asked Conrad. "If it does, by all means say what you like."

"I don't understand you." She drooped disdainful eyelids.

"What you said was unworthy of you. You know it was."

"I really forget what I did say. Please talk about something else. What is it they are playing?"

They were playing *Cavalleria* now, so he scorned to reply to this otherwise than by a look.

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"I asked you a question," she said in tones of ice.

"I beg your pardon. They are playing *Cavalleria Rusticana*. An opera. Composed by a young Italian. His name is Mascagni."

"You are rude!" she exclaimed.

"I am human, Joan. You hurt me."

Then her sister and Bletchworth reappeared. "Perhaps you know a good hotel?" Conrad was saying.

"An hotel where?" inquired Lady Bletchworth.

"Mr. Warrener is going to Homburg; I tell him everybody says it's deadly dull there this year," murmured Mrs. Adaile.

It was deadly dull in Ostend, too, during the next hour. Both women were rather quiet, and Bletchworth was exceptionally wearisome. But for the fact that it was the farewell evening Conrad would have seen friends among the company and gone to greet them.

However, at last the orchestra finished, and they all got up. A leisurely crowd was flocking to the exit, and—perhaps it was the crowd, perhaps it was Lady Bletchworth—Conrad and Mrs. Adaile were separated from the others for satisfactory seconds.

"Won't you forgive me?" he whispered.

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Even a crowd has merits—her hand rested on his arm an instant.

"It must be fate," he said; "I always offend you just when we're going to part. Do you remember?"

She nodded. "I remember." Her glance was very pretty in the moonshine.

"This won't be our last talk together?" he begged. "What are you going to do when we go in?"

"I suppose we shall sit in the garden."

"But—everybody?"

"I expect so. . . . Don't let's keep behind! Walk with Lily." She addressed her brother-in-law, and Conrad sauntered beside Lady Bletchworth.

The windows of the Villa this, and the Villa that, were thrown wide behind the mass of blooms. In the crimson dusk of lamp-shades there was the glint of a white gown, the glow of a cigarette point among cushions, a bubble of laughter. Every minute a dim interior flashed to brightness—someone returned and switched on the light, a woman took off her hat before the mirror. Through one window came the jingle of money on a card table; through another shouts—Paulette Fleury was singing to friends one of the songs that she had not sung

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at the Empire in London. To the left, the track of moonlight on the sea kept pace with Conrad.

It was more agreeable in the garden than on the terrace at the onset. Already it had an air of intimacy, the artificial enclosure, with its tesselated paving, and its affectation of rusticity; already he was on good terms with it. Curiously enough, such hotel gardens, misnamed as they are, have a knack of making a visitor feel at home, of endearing themselves to him, more quickly than acres of lawns and elms.

Lady Bletchworth wanted a brandy-and-soda, and Conrad had one, too; Mrs. Adaile and Bletchworth drank champagne. Presently they referred to the shooting-box, to the people they expected to see there. Almost for the first time Conrad was blankly sensible of inhabiting a different sphere; he hoped they wouldn't ask him if he knew any of the people they were mentioning. He got very near to his youth in that moment; there was a revival of his boyhood's dumb constraint. . . . How odd it was! they were all sitting together like this, and after to-night he was never likely to meet her. Front doors between them! 'Gina, of course, might be useful; but how stupid of him not to have got into the right set in town when he came back from the Colony! He supposed it wouldn't have been difficult, with

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the money. Londoners boasted that everything the world yielded was to be bought in London, and it was true—even to dignities and reputations.

"Well, I am forced to admit that I don't know what women go to the moors for," said Bletchworth. "You don't take the sport seriously, and therefore you are out of place. What do *you* say, Mr. Warrener?"

"Well, I can hardly say anything," owned Conrad; "I *don't* go to the moors."

"But if you did, you wouldn't prefer a grouse to a woman, I'm sure?" asked Lady Bletchworth.

"A man does not go to the moors to talk to women," insisted her husband. "That is my point. Women always want to flirt just as the birds are rising. Women are very desirable at a dance, but when it comes to birds, or it comes to cricket, when it comes to anything important, I say, reluctantly, they can't be serious. That is my point—you don't take the thing seriously. Now, at the Eton and Harrow, were you earnest about it, had you got the matter at heart? No, no; all you wanted to do was to walk about, and to have lunch."

"A lot of boys playing ball!" she said. "And then they take up all the lawn besides. So selfish of them!"

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"Ah!" said Bletchworth warningly, "that is the tone that is going to do the harm, that is the tone we have to guard against. What has made us what we are? What has given England the place she holds? I protest, I protest absolutely against irresponsible—er—comment. The foreign ideas that are creeping into papers that have always had my—er—approval will sap the country's manhood if we don't make a stand. Joan —I am sure Joan agrees with me?"

She was leaning back absently, trifling with a porte-bonheur on her wrist; the blue fire of the diamonds was ablaze. It caught Conrad's glance; from her wrist his gaze travelled to her eyes. They told him, "I'm so bored."

"Yes, indeed," she assented, "you're quite right." It would have been evident to anyone but Bletchworth that she had not heard what he said.

There were fewer people in the garden by this time. In the knowledge that the evening was nearly over, a wave of sentiment stirred Conrad. Even her message of comprehension did nothing to subdue his annoyance. What likelihood remained of a tête-à-tête? The evening from first to last had been wasted in stupidities.

Presently another group went inside, presently there was no one left but themselves. Finally

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Lady Bletchworth yawned. He wished fervently that she had yawned an hour ago.

"I think it's time we all went to bed," she said. "You've discoursed quite enough, Charlie. Shall we see you in the morning, Mr. Warrener?"

"Oh yes," he said, "of course. What time is the boat?"

"I don't know—ten something, isn't it? Well, I'll say 'good-night.' I wish we were staying on, really I do—I shall have a racking headache to-morrow evening. Are you ready, Joan?"

"Quite," said Mrs. Adaile; "*I* have a headache now."

He was hopeless until she let him see her slip the porte-bonheur into her chair before she rose.

"Good-night, Mr. Warrener."

"Good-night, Mrs. Adaile," he said.

When he was alone he sat down again, and waited for her return; her manœuvre might fail, someone return with her—the bracelet must be lying where she had "dropped" it.

More than five minutes crept by before a step sounded. He turned eagerly, and with dismay beheld Lord Armoury approaching. The intruder gaped at the view, and stood hesitating, with his hands in his pockets. It was an instant of the keenest suspense. Would he withdraw? No, he lounged forward. He threw himself into

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the very chair, and stretched his legs across another.

Conrad muttered an anathema on him.

"Eh?" said Lord Armoury.

"I didn't speak," said Conrad frigidly.

The young man took out a cigarette, and opened his match-box. It was empty.

"Got a light?" he inquired.

"I'm sorry I haven't," said Conrad, momentarily encouraged.

"Rotten show!" said the Earl; "where's a waiter?" He contemplated his cigarette with a semi-intoxicated frown, and transferred his feet to the table. It was apparent that he meant to stop although he could not smoke. With his change of position he was liable to come in contact with the bracelet, and Conrad watched him nervously, but he did not seem to be discommoded by it.

"Seen Paulette?" he asked.

"No." The "no" of a man who is not to be drawn into conversation.

"Pauly's a bit of *all* right," affirmed the Earl, undeterred. "I don't pretend to be up to all the patter, but—wot *ho!*"

Speechlessly Conrad hoped the lady wouldn't come back yet.

"Three hundred a week she refused for a re-

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turn engagement at the Empire—told me so herself to-night. That's Pauly. Got the hump. What's three hundred to Pauly? I told 'em how she'd catch on before she went over. Don't I *know?*" He winked profoundly. "Look here, you'll see an artist in October at the Syndicate halls, that's—wot *ho!* She's going to knock 'em. Between ourselves she's got some new business, that—well, it's great! Never been tried. I saw her when she was doing the last turn at the South London. I said to Arthur, 'Cocky, that's a winner!' Roberts couldn't see it. *I* saw it; I can put my finger on the talent every time. She's going to make Marie sit up, my boy—she's another Marie Lloyd. Don't I *know?* I've got the judgment, I can spot 'em with one peeper. . . . Isn't there a waiter in this damned hotel? I could do with a tiddley. Where's a bell?"

"It's no use ringing," said Conrad, "nobody ever comes. It wants someone to go in and stir them up."

But now Mrs. Adaile reappeared.

"Oh!" she murmured. And then, "I've dropped a bracelet somewhere; I came down to look for it. Good evening, Lord Armoury."

"A bracelet?" echoed Conrad with concern.

"Good evening, Mrs. Adaile—a bracelet? Crumbs!" said Armoury.

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"Yes, isn't it a nuisance! I don't know how I could have lost it—I suppose the clasp was loose. I had it on out here."

"Let me help you," said Conrad. In an undertone he added, "Don't find it yet. Let's look further off. Oh my dearest, it was so sweet of you! I'm in such a rage, I'm so wretched."

"Where were you sitting, Mrs. Adaile?" asked Armoury, peering about.

"Over here, over there, I don't know," she said hurriedly. . . . "Is it still in the chair?" she whispered.

"Yes," whispered Conrad. "Are you sorry you're going from me?"

"A little."

"To leave you like this," he sighed, "it's awful. Joan——"

"Well?"

"Let me come to your room to say 'good-bye.'"

She started.

"Hallo! Have you got it?" exclaimed Armoury.

"No," she said, "I—I thought I had."

"Joan?"

"I daren't," she faltered. "My maid——"

"Come and say 'good-bye' to *me,* then. Do!"

"Find it!" she said agitatedly—"he'll guess."

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"What's that?" cried Conrad. "Here it is—why, in one of our chairs! May I—?" He fastened the bracelet on her wrist. "Make me happy. Come to me!" he begged. "Will you? Number seventeen."

Her fingers touched his hand.

"I'm so immensely grateful to you both," she said serenely.

"Lucky for her we were here!" the intruder remarked when she had gone. "One of the servants might have pinched it by the morning."

"Yes, I suppose it was as well we were here," said Conrad amiably. "If it hadn't been for you, I should have turned in before this." He dropped back into his seat, resigning himself to tedium a little longer.

He lolled there discreetly, making civil responses—and gradually he realised that Flossie Coburg's son was not wholly to be blamed for the tedium; he recognised that there was a dulness of his own spirit. While he countenanced the garrulity of a fool, his thoughts were with scenes of twenty years before, and sadly the man strove to revive in his heart the idolatry and illusions of the boy. Oh, for the enchantment of the summer when he had called her "Mrs. Adaile!" . . . If he could only keep remembering it was the same woman! But never had she seemed so

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different to him as in these minutes—never had he desired so little as now when she had promised all.

The ground floor of the hotel was partially dark when he crossed it; a purposeless waiter hovered in obscurity. Upstairs, along the passage, the tan and black rows of boots, shapely on boot-trees, indicated that most of the visitors had retired. A drowsy lady's-maid put forth an expectant face, and withdrew it wearily. Conrad felt about the wall for the electric button, which seemed always in a different spot, and found it. Then he closed his door as completely as was possible without turning the knob.

As he put down his watch he saw that it was late, but he knew that it was not yet late enough, and his movements were leisurely. He wanted a cigarette—the more because he had deprived himself of one outside by saying that he had no match, but he was reluctant to give the odour of tobacco to the room. A superfluous grace, perhaps, now that most women smoked? Still he was reluctant. He threw down his cigarette-case, too, and the rest of the things that had been in his pockets. . . .

He looked at himself ruminatingly in the mirror, and brushed his moustache.

One of the lights hung above the pillow—it

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was convenient to read by. Presently it occurred to him that nearly two acts of "Le Marquis de Priola" remained to divert him. He put forth his arm for it, and, stretching, reached it. He turned the leaves. . . . *Une dame viendra de deux a trois.* Ah yes, this was as far as he had read.

The effort to give his attention to the play grew gradually less. Mournfulness faded, and in the next scene his interest was alert. Once he laughed. His thoughts were no longer with the boy who had lain wakeful through a night just to hear her footstep in the hall.

The wind was rising, and intermittently it tricked and irritated him. The blustering wind, and the chiming of a clock made the only sounds.

Again the clock rang out. This time he counted the strokes with annoyance. He yawned. His interest was wandering from the play now. It began to seem to him that Priola talked too much. What was keeping her—had she repented her promise? He tossed the book aside, and lay watching the door.

After he had watched it for nearly half-an-hour it was gently opened, and swiftly closed, and Mrs. Adaile stood on the threshold. She paused there diffidently, with downcast eyes. She wore a long clinging robe of crepe de chine,

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veiled partly by a stole of Venetian point. The sleeves of the deep toned lace, dividing at the shoulders, drooped from her like wings. One daring touch of colour, the flame of nasturtium, at her breast threw into dazzling relief the gleaming whiteness of her skin, the burnished gold of her hair. She paused, awaiting doubtless the words of welcome, of encouragement, that would vanquish her timidity. But Conrad slept. A respiration too loud to be thought rapture, and too faint to be called a snore, smote the lady's hearing. Startled, she looked up; forked lightning flashed at him from her indignant eyes. But, tranquil, Conrad slept.

What an offence! Wasn't it enough to enrage the sweetest of women? Put yourself—I mean it was unpardonable!

For a second she seemed about to escape even more surreptitiously than she had entered; and then a smile, half sad, half whimsical, twitched her lips. A sense of humour—how much it spares us, how far it goes in life! A little pathetic that often a sense of humour wins affection and the noble qualities get nothing but a dull respect. She looked at a pencil-case on the table, and stood tempted, her fingers at her mouth. Dared she do it! She would not have roused him for a coronet—and the creak of a

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board, even the scratching of the lead, might be fatal. She wavered. She moved towards the pencil slowly, stealthily, inch by inch.

The table was gained. There was nothing to write on. A paper-covered volume lay to her hand; with infinite precaution she tore the title-page. Tremulously she scribbled, holding her breath. Where to leave the message, where to put it so that it couldn't be overlooked? Again she hesitated. Conrad slept sound, a glance assured her of it. Again she ventured. An instant her gaze dwelt upon him, still with that smile half mirthful and half melancholy on her face. She nodded, wide-eyed—and on the tips of her toes crept out unheard, unseen.

When Conrad woke, a servant was admitting the sunshine through the window; his coffee steamed by his side. As he sat up—and almost before memory thudded in him—his view met the front page of "Le Marquis de Priola" pinned to the bed-curtain. He rolled towards it haggardly. On it was written:—

"*Dreamer!* Good-bye. There is no way back to Rouen."

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CHAPTER XIII

"I MUST say I was very happy on the stage," sighed the Countess of Darlington, lifting the teapot.

The Earl of Armoury's mother threw up her eyes. A shapeless, waddling woman, the Duchess, with a sanctimonious voice. There were elderly gentlemen who, remembering Flossie's agility with a tambourine at the old Pavilion, felt reformation to be a sad affair when they looked at her.

"Not 'happy,'" she said piously, "dazzled—only dazzled, dear Lady Darlington. Ladies like you and I can't be happy on the stage. It goes against the grain with you and I."

Lady Darlington pouted. She was provokingly pretty when she pouted. She had pouted at Darlington on the day he met her.

"But I *was* happy," she declared.

"You weren't satisfied in your heart; I'm sure you always felt there was better work to be done?"

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"Oh yes, but I hoped to get leading parts in time."

"I mean purer work," explained the Duchess, wincing; "social, helpful work."

Lady Darlington laughed. She was prettier still when she laughed. She had laughed at Darlington on the day he proposed.

"No, really not," she said frankly, "I never thought about it for a moment. Do you know, Duchess, I've always wanted to ask you—didn't *you* ache to go back to it after you married?"

"Oh, never," exclaimed the Duchess; "I was grateful to Providence for letting me get away from it all. Circumstances made me go into the business, but I was never a pro, I mean to say a 'professional,' by nature. My father, the captain, died when I was quite a child, and I had my dear mother to support."

"M'yes," murmured Lady Darlington, looking at the ceiling. "You were before my time, but of course I've heard. . . . Perhaps if I had been in the music-halls *I* should have been glad to get away from it all," she added; "I was in the theatres, you know."

"The smalls, I think—I mean to say the 'minor provincial towns?'" said the Duchess a shade tartly; "one of Jenkinson's Number 2 companies, wasn't it?"

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"Lots of people considered it was better than the Number 1," returned Lady Darlington with pride, "and the *Rotherham Advertiser* said a voice of such diapason as mine wasn't often heard in musical comedy."

"Such what as yours?"

"Diapason. Won't you have some muffin?"

"They always serve me out so," said the Duchess, "but I *will* have just a mossel." She regarded her hostess anxiously; "I hope you aren't going to be mad?" she said.

"I *am* mad," admitted Rosalind—her name was Rosalind—"mad with the longing for auld lang syne. If I weren't crazy I shouldn't own it, because you can't enter into my feelings a bit, but you're the only woman I meet who ought to be able to understand them. Long? Sometimes for a treat I tell the servants I'm not at home to anyone, and I shut myself up and long the tears into my eyes!"

"You cry for the stage? Oh, but, my dear Lady Darlington, you mustn't give way, you must be firm with yourself. Think, just think, what an example you'd be setting if you took to it again! In our position we have the Country to consider. The middle classes say, 'What's good enough for the Aristocracy must be good

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enough for us.' We have to consider our influence on those in a humbler sphere."

"I'm not going to take to it again," said Rosalind. "How can I? Besides, I don't want so much to act—I've no ambition except to be jolly—it's the life I ache for. I'm dull, dull, dull! I want to be among the people I remember. My heart turns back to Dixie. I wouldn't say 'thank you' to be with actors and actresses in London, in the West-End; they're only imitations of the Lords and Ladies that bore me. I want to be on the road with a Number 2 crowd—yes, and a Number 3 crowd for preference. I want to arrive in a hole-and-corner town on a Sunday night and have supper in lodgings, and see stout in a jug again, and call the landlady 'Ma.' Oh, how soul-stirring it would be to call a landlady 'Ma'!"

"Lodgings? Look at your drawing-room, with Louis Cans furniture!" said the Duchess admonishingly. "You can't be serious?"

"Serious? I'm pathetic! Of course I should find I had been spoilt for it—the pleasure wouldn't last; the stout would taste sour soon, and I should find the landlady impudent, and the lodgings dirty; I daresay I should wish myself back in St. James's Square before I had been away a month. But I don't want to give up St.

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James's Square—I only want a week-end sometimes as a tonic. That's all I want, just week-ends. If I could be Rosalind Heath again from Saturday to Monday sometimes, I'd be Lady Darlington all the rest of the year cheerfully enough."

This was the moment when her Idea was born. As the idea had consequences, it is noteworthy that this was the moment. If she could be Rosalind Heath again from Saturday to Monday! She had never debated the possibility; but why not—why not even for a week? She couldn't call herself "Rosalind Heath" again, because everybody in Theatre Land knew that Rosalind Heath had married the Earl of Darlington, but who among a lowly band of players would know her face? she had not been a star. All she needed for the freak was a confidant. What had become of Tattie Lascelles?

Lady Darlington blushed with self-reproach. That she should have to question what had become of Tattie! She sat, after the Duchess had departed, remembering days when she and Tattie had been bosom friends. They had shared hopes and lodgings; they had told each other their peccadilloes, and even their salaries. And now she didn't know where Tattie was? Could St. James's Square have made her heartless? How

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had their correspondence died? . . . Ah yes, in Tattie's last letter ages ago she had asked for the sum of five pounds "just for a fortnight." But how monstrous of Tattie to feel constrained because she hadn't sent it back! Who had expected it?

On the seventeenth day of December, when Darlington, looking a ridiculous object, had boomed away in a new car, of which he was inordinately proud, Rosalind stole guiltily into a news-agent's. She would not meet her lord again for a month. Her beautiful eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were flushed. She tendered two pennies to a vulgar man, smoking a clay pipe behind the counter, and asked for *The Stage*. To the happily constituted there can seem nothing calculated to kindle the emotions in the act of buying a twopenny paper in a squalid shop, but Rosalind had a temperament, and temperaments play queer tricks. (See Conrad's.) The tender grace of a day that was dead hallowed the damp copy of a journal in which she had formerly advertised that she was "Resting"; the touch of vanished hands sent little thrills to her heart as her gaze embraced familiar names.

She went back to the drawing-room fire, and read them diligently. Dusk and a footman crept in before she discovered "Miss Tattie Lascelles,"

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but that artist's announcement leapt to her with the electric light. Miss Tattie Lascelles informed the kingdom that she was specially engaged to create the part of "Delicia Potts" in the maritime musical farce entitled *Little Miss Kiss-And-Tell,* on Blithepoint Pier. The date chosen for this perfectly unimportant production was Monday, December 22nd. Then Rosalind, who was to go to the Marrables, in Leicestershire for Christmas, wrote Lady Marrable a note of grieved excuse, and scribbled a letter to Tattie, which began, "Take two bedrooms in Blithepoint, and don't breathe a word to a soul till you see me."

And though the happily constituted may be sceptical again, she felt more joyous than she had done for five illustrious years.

Blithepoint is about thirty-three miles by rail from Sweetbay. It is a grey, bleak place, with the plainest female population in England. By reason of some interesting quality of the soil, no wet month can be wet enough to restrain dust from swirling in clouds on the first dry morning, and there being no protection on the East, it swirls for the greater part of the year on an animated East wind. Blithepoint is advertised as a winter resort. It is larger than Sweetbay, and less unfashionable, but the climate, and its

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wry-faced women, make it more depressing. Nobody is aware how much can be spent on being exceedingly depressed until he has stayed in a Blithepoint hotel. Rosalind was a shade uneasy in the thought that someone among the visitors might recognise her; she knew that at Christmas eccentric Londoners occasionally went down there, and wished afterwards they had been economical and gone to Egypt. But she didn't falter.

She ran away on Sunday the 21st. She had put on her simplest costume, and her portmanteau told no tales. To make-believe to the fullest extent, she travelled in a third-class compartment. Already she was greatly excited. As the train crawled out of Victoria she could have clapped her hands.

When she arrived it was eight o'clock, and a bitter evening. The scramble for luggage kept her shivering on the platform for ten minutes, and then a fly bumped her through the shuttered town. It was the hour of local dissipation; in the best lit thoroughfare the blades of Blithepoint paraded jauntily, ogling a collection of "business young ladies" that looked unique even to a passing glance. Lady Darlington, reckless for sensations, envied these roysterers who could feel devilish gay so easily.

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The cab shaved a corner, and rattled into a neighbourhood of obscure apartment-houses. Her mutinous heart warmed with sentiment, and she forgot how cold her pretty feet were. The cab stopped. She saw the blind of the ground-floor window dragged aside; an impetuous figure appeared, and vanished. The street-door was pulled wide, and a girl with a cloud of hair, and a string of barbaric beads dangling to the waist, flew down the steps and hugged her.

"You trump! You've really come!"

"You duck! How jolly to see you!"

"'Ere, two bob, missie," said the flyman, "when you've done canoodling."

They ran into the parlour, and laughed at each other in the gaslight.

"Take your things off," said Tattie, "let me help you! I hope you'll like the diggings. I wrote to the swellest address I could hear of, when I got your letter."

"But you shouldn't have. What for?"

"Well, for you!"

"I wanted everything just as it used to be. That was it."

"How funny! But I don't suppose these will strike you as very swagger after what you've got at home."

"They don't."

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"Won't they be good enough?"

"They're heavenly. Oh, Tattie, how good it is to be back! Did anybody bring in my trunk? 'In the Shade of the Palm,' and a 'Vocal Folio' on the piano! And professional photographs on the shelf. Oh, let me see the photographs! 'To Mrs. Cheney from Miss Bijou Chamberlain—wishing you a Merry Christmas.' Who is she?"

"She was here last week—a Variety artist. She seems to have been comfortable, as she gave the landlady her photograph. Are you ready for supper?"

"Stout?"

"Of course."

"In a jug?"

"Well, I thought after what you had come from I had better order Guinness."

For a moment Rosalind looked downcast. "Ah well, never mind," she said; "we'll have it in a jug to-morrow."

They drew their chairs to the ham-and-beef, and the landlady brought in the Guinness.

"Good evening, Ma," said Rosalind, with youth in her bosom.

"Good evening, my dear," said Mrs. Cheney. "You'll be glad of your supper, I daresay, after your journey?" She put comestibles on the table in three paper bags. "I was meaning to

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tell you, Miss Lascelles, that if you'd like a bit of something hot in the evening when you come back from the show, you can have it. I'm not one to fuss about hotting something up. Sundays we let the fire out, but in the week you can have it and welcome."

"Good business!" said Miss Lascelles. "In some places you 'get it hot' if you ask for it."

"By rights some places shouldn't take professionals," returned Mrs. Cheney. "I've 'eard many tales. Miss Chamberlain—her on the mantelpiece—was telling me that where she was in Brighton they wouldn't allow her to have her uncle in to see her. Such a quiet, ladylike gal, too!"

"Can such things be?" cried Rosalind. "Is a poor girl to be cut off from her own flesh and blood because she's in diggings?"

"Ah, I don't wonder at your asking!" said Mrs. Cheney. "Not, mind you," she added, "but what letting lodgings over a number of years makes one a bit suspicious of uncles. I've known a gentleman brought to these very rooms after the show on three different Monday evenings as the uncle of three different young ladies. And dreadful taken aback he was when he see me each time!"

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"I'm afraid those were flighty girls," said Rosalind severely.

"Untruthful they was," said Mrs. Cheney, "and so I told 'em. I say nothing about visitors, I'm not that evil-minded. So long as the lady pays a bit extra for the gas, and the gentleman don't slam the door when he goes, I like to think well of everyone. But I 'ate lies."

She drew the cork, and retired; and Rosalind said, "Well, what about the show, Tat? What sort of part have you got?"

"The part's rather good," said Miss Lascelles.

"Hurrah! What screw?"

"Rotten—thirty-five shillings. I had to take what I could get; I've been out a long time. They're paying awful salaries in this crowd; the chorus only get about fifteen bob, I believe—they're half of them novices."

"I say! Whose crowd is it?"

"It's a Syndicate; nobody ever heard of it before. And the Tenor has such a cold he could hardly speak at the dress-rehearsal last night—goodness knows how he's going to sing to-morrow."

"Who's your principal woman?"

"She has backed out; they've put somebody else into the part at the last minute. And the scenery has still to come down—it's a bit of a

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muddle all round. I wish I could have got into a better thing, but I was so hard up—you ought to have seen where I was lodging! I tried to get shopped last month as an Extra. That speaks!"

"An Extra? No? Tat! why didn't you write to me?" exclaimed Rosalind reproachfully.

"Oh, I don't know. I heard the 'great' Miss Hayward wanted thirty Extra ladies to go on in the ball scene. It was twenty-five bob a week —she wanted picked women—it would have just done me. Lil Rayburn lent me her little squirrel coat, and a black velvet hat. I tell you I looked a treat when I went down! There was three hundred and forty girls waiting; we were sent across the stage thirty at the time. The great Hayward sat in the stalls, with her pince-nez up. 'You!' she said, pointing; 'the one in the squirrel coat.' So I went to her. 'I think you'll do,' she drawled; 'you know what the money is?' 'Twenty-five, Miss Hayward,' I said, 'isn't it?' 'No, a guinea,' she said; 'it doesn't matter to *you*.' 'Thank you,' I said, 'I've got to keep myself out of *my* salary—*I* haven't got a man, and a flat!' Potter, the agent, was in an awful stew—'Oh, you shouldn't have spoken to Miss Hayward like that!' 'To *hell!*' I said."

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"Cat!" cried Rosalind. "Because you were well-dressed?"

"Yes; and if I had gone shabby, she wouldn't have noticed me at all. . . . You know I've been in the Variety business since you saw me?"

"The music-halls! You haven't?"

"Straight! I was one of the Four Sisters Tarantelle. Jolly good money—I got five pounds a week when we worked two shows a night; I never got less than three ten. I can't get it on the stage."

"Why did you give them up? But the tips are very heavy, aren't they?"

"They weren't heavy for *me*, I didn't tip anybody except the dresser. Chloe made the engagements, so Chloe could pay the tips. Trust this child! What does make you sick in that business is the comedians, with the red noses and the umbrellas—they're always after you. There was a little brute in one show—his wife was in the bill, too; she did sentimental ballads. Well! how he could let her travel *I* don't know. It *was* her last week, but she wasn't fit to be working so long, we almost expected any night—— And there he was after me all the time! 'I shall write to you, Tattie—I see you go to Balham, and Walham Greene next week.' 'Who gave you leave to call me "Tattie?"' I

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said; 'You low cur, I wish I was a man, to give you a good hiding.' I did pity his wife. She never spoke to me—she used to pass me in the wings with her head turned away; I suppose she thought I was as bad as *he* was. I said to her one evening when she was ill, 'Can I get you anything, Miss——' I forget what her name was. 'No, I thank you, Miss Tarantelle,' she said—like that; wouldn't look at me! I *was* so sorry for her. Poor little woman, what a life!"

Rosalind shuddered. After a pause, she said:—

"You're well out of it, dear."

"Except for the money. I expect I'll go back to it as soon as I can. I had a contract for a year—they wanted the option of renewing for another year."

"*They* were to have the option?"

"Yes—all on their side; I didn't think it was good enough to sign that. So I said I'd like to, but I was going to be married at the end of the summer."

"You weren't really?"

"Not much! No marriage for me—not in the profession anyhow!—but lots of them think a contract doesn't bind you any more if you marry. Lil Rayburn put me up to that dodge. She lent me her song when the Tarantelles

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wanted me—it was a great concession: her big success! Whenever she doesn't want to sign an option and is afraid to refuse point-blank, she looks bashful and says she's going to be married at the end of the summer. She has been going to be married 'at the end of the summer' for the last nine years."

They turned to the fire, and lit cigarettes—Rosalind's; she had remembered to put a hundred in her trunk.

"'What is the use of loving a girl
If the girl don't love *you*?'"

hummed Tattie. The song was just published. "They *are* fine cigarettes!

'What is the use of loving a girl
When you know she don't want yer *to*?'

Of course, you have the best of everything now. It does seem curious."

"My having the best of everything?"

"No, your wanting the worst.

'What if she's fair beyond all compare,
And what if her eyes are blue——'

Fancy living in your style, and coming to rooms like these for fun!"

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"Oh, Tattie," said Rosalind, "that's just what I did come for! I haven't any fun at home."

"But I thought in Society they had no end of a good time?"

"So they do, in a way, but it's the wrong way for me—I never rehearsed for it, I'm not easy in the part; I wasn't meant for high-class comedy. And I miss you—I've no pal now."

"*I*'ve missed *you,* I can tell you. Oh, the tour after you left, wasn't that damn dull! The girl I lived with was so off—common. Well, you can tell *I'm* a perfect lady—I just said 'damn'—but I usedn't to, did I? Remember? Good-hearted girl, but she was so horrid at table. And under that silk blouse—all anyhow! Not that I like to see a girl with too smart underlinen, I always think it looks fishy; but hers was—well, if she had been run over one day when we were out, I'd have been ashamed to own her!"

"Let's go and look up some of the company, shall we?" said Rosalind. "What name had I better have?"

"What's the matter with 'Heath'? There are plenty of 'Miss Heaths' about."

"Yes, but you're sure to let the 'Rosalind' slip, and that will give me away. Introduce me as 'Miss Daintree.' Do you know where any of the women are staying?"

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"We'll find them on the pier. We always make for the pier on Sunday evenings when there's a concert; it's something to do. I suppose I'm to say you're in the profession?"

"I'm an actress out of an engagement," assented Rosalind, throwing her cigarette in the fender. "Make haste, or we shall be too late!"

The boards of *Little Miss Kiss-and-Tell* were big outside the pier. At the turnstile Miss Lascelles nodded towards them, saying, "In the company." The man answered, "All right, Miss; come in through the gate, then." At the pay-box of the theatre she showed her card, saying, "Can you oblige me with a couple of seats?" The business manager answered, "With pleasure, my dear."

They sat down in the stalls, close to the red glow of a gas-stove, and listened to a dispirited soprano who was supposed to be singing "The Holy City." She was not really singing "The Holy City"; from beginning to end she articulated not a word save "Jerusalem." She simply kept her mouth ajar and wailed the air. There were only about twenty people in the rows of crimson velvet seats, and most of these were *Kiss-and-Tell* people. The others were very young men, in caps, who bore the sacred music on Sunday evening for the sake of an advance view of

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the girls who were to perform on Monday. The very young men watched the arrivals with much interest, and if the ladies in the stalls were unattractive, it was said in Blithepoint on Sunday night that "the piece on the pier to-morrow was no good."

When the dispirited soprano had finished, the actresses applauded her warmly, in the hope of cheering her up; and the sixpenny balcony rattled its umbrellas, in the hope of getting a song more than it had paid for. Then one of the actresses murmured to Miss Lascelles, "How badly she holds herself, doesn't she?" and Miss Lascelles presented "Miss Daintree."

Rosalind soon discovered that nobody was sanguine of *Little Miss-Kiss-and-Tell* being well received, and—having forgotten something of the world she was revisiting—it surprised her to note the light-heartedness of the professionals, who tottered on the brink of disaster. They were all pitiably poor, they were likely to fall out of employment at the worst time of year; but they said gaily, "Oh well, let's hope for the best! It may be all right at night. It's no use looking on the black side of things." And most of them were totally dependent on their salaries, though that was not the belief of the very young men who endured "The Holy City."

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Only Miss Jinman, a large, elderly lady who spoke in a bass voice, was pessimistic. Years ago she had sung in parts of dignity, and hectored first-rate touring companies; to-day she was engaged for an amorous old woman in Turkish trousers, whom the low comedian was to pelt with insults as often as she came on the stage.

"I don't think the piece will last a month," she said to Rosalind, in her lugubrious bass. "It isn't amusing at all. Vulgar, very vulgar! I may be too critical, I'm used to such high-class things, as you know—my notices as 'Buttercup' were immense—but I call it a 'rotter.' I see a frost, a killing frost, my dear. I keep my opinion to myself"—she was disseminating it with gusto—"I don't want to give the others the hump, but I see us all out of a shop till the spring comes."

"Oh, you're always croaking, Miss Jinman," snapped a black-eyed girl with golden hair. "Give us a chance, do!"

"A chance?" returned Miss Jinman heavily. "Chit, you have no chance. It's only kindness to tell you so."

"Thanks awf'ly," said the girl. She had not been long on the stage. Her married sister kept "Dining Rooms" in Holloway, and less than a year ago the "artiste" had served as waitress

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there and been ordered to " 'Urry up with that there yorkshire-pudden."

"You will never do any better than you're doing," affirmed Miss Jinman. "And I could say as much to others present if I hadn't too much consideration for their feelings. To more than one," she added significantly. "Look at *me*, with all my experience! And *I* am clever, and *I* can sing; my notices as 'Buttercup' were immense. And where am I now? On a pier with amateurs—amateurs and novices. I don't know what the profession is coming to—it's a very different thing to what it was when *I* was in my prime."

"I expect most things have woke up a bit since then," said the golden-haired brunette; "the bringing in of railways must have made such a difference."

"Small-part people were taught to respect the principals," said Miss Jinman sternly. "Minxes kept their places."

"It's a pity you couldn't keep yours!" said the dark one with the golden locks. But harmony was restored during the next selection by the band.

There was a little sleet blowing when the audience straggled homeward. The lights of the Belle Vue Hotel were not put out yet, and care-

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lessly, Miss Jinman observed that the people inside must be warmer than *she* was. Rosalind took the hint. It is only in the lowest ranks of the theatrical profession that the ladies refresh themselves in bars; a second-rate provincial actress would wither the person who invited her; but Miss Jinman and Miss Lascelles had adapted their manners to their company, and it was a very humble company indeed. So they went into the Lounge, and sat down.

Another professional lady came in, and inquired generously, "Are you drinking, girls?"

Miss Lascelles said, "Yes, we've got port wine."

"Serve you right!" said the other lady, with a pretty wit.

Though she was on the high road to Prague, Lady Darlington was relieved to see that the clock pointed to five minutes to ten. When the Lounge closed, the party shook hands with her heartily, and hoped they would meet her again in the morning. Distressingly ill-bred of them to drink port in a smoky bar—not at all the sort of thing I can ask you to condone. But some of the sirens who had lolled in velvet fauteuils were financing on coppers until the first week's treasury was paid, and tea-and-bread-and-butter

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was all they had had to support their internal economies during the day. How amused the very young men in the stalls would be at my simplicity in believing it!

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CHAPTER XIV

SINCE the last chapter went away to be typewritten I, myself, have been in the theatre on Blithepoint Pier. A pantomime was being performed. The seat I was in yielded me a view of more than I had paid to look at; I could see the prompt-entrance, which is the place where they signal for the sunset and the moonbeams and where the players come to peep at the doings on the stage. Last night a young woman came there. She wore a brief, blue skirt, and a silver crown, and for the nonce an unlovely wrap hung over her whitened back and bosom, since you may get rheumatism in the prompt-entrance, as well as moonbeams. Before the footlights, two comic men were bawling a duet; I knew they were comic because they had made their faces so repulsive; and the spirit moving her, the woman broke into lazy dance steps to the refrain. In the glare and the distance she was pretty. As I watched, I felt instinctively for the hand of Rosalind; I knew the craving that was in her blood, and turned to meet her gaze. If she had

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been there, I think she would have liked me. I said, "Those who saw that would understand Rosalind; the tawdry figure dancing in the draught says everything!" That was why I brought the picture at home, to show it to you . . . but somehow, all at once, I doubt whether you will understand any better than you did.

However I beg you to believe that on the morrow Rosalind accompanied Tattie Lascelles to a rehearsal with infinite zest. She had no right to accompany her, but a discussion was in progress when they arrived, and she passed unchallenged. Mr. Omee, the local manager, who stood in the pit, was talking to Mr. Quisby, the travelling manager, who stood on the stage. It appeared that owing to the pressure of Christmas traffic, the railway company had failed to despatch the scenery.

"Well, but who has been to the station? What do they say?"

"I tell you the fools at this end don't know anything about it."

"What the bleak Helvellyn's the good of bringing the piece without any scenery?"

"Isn't there any scenery in your theatre?"

"I've told you what cloth you can have, my boy. That's the best we can do."

"It's no use offering us Hyde Park Corner

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when we want a blooming mosque! . . . Well, let's have a look at it!"

Mr. Omee shouted for "Bates."

There was a lull, and then from unseen heights a voice announced that Bates had just "stepped outside."

Mr. Omee ramped in the pit.

The shouts for "Bates" were resumed—the rafters rang with the name of "Bates"—and after some minutes a discomfited working man slouched on to the stage, to be received with a volley of abuse. He was understood to retort that he was unable to be in two places at once, and that parties who expected it might find some one else to do the work, that was the straight tip. Those nearest to him also learnt that he held a poor opinion of the job at its blessed best.

"Let's have that Hyde Park cloth," commanded Mr. Omee. "Come on, look alive, man —hurry up!"

"What *I* want to know," grunted the low comedian, "is 'ow I'm to get that wheeze of mine into that song. That's what's bothering me."

"What song?" inquired Miss Lascelles.

"What song! Why, 'All the Winners.' I was going to say that the Blithepoint football team was 'all the winners' in the match on Sat-

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urday, and now I'm told that Sweetbay beat 'em. My luck again! That queers my wheeze."

"Why not say," suggested Rosalind, "that the *next time* Sweetbay is rash enough to play them, Blithepoint will be all the winners?"

"Wot ho!" said the low comedian, brightening. He added promptly, "Of course that's what I was thinking of doing. But I must see if I can get all that cackle into the tune. Where's the conductor of the blooming band?"

Presently the cloth was displayed. It was no faithful representation of Hyde Park Corner, but it was still less like a mosque, and the players stood about, and sneered, and muttered contemptuous criticisms. Miss Jinman said that in all her experience she had never known such disgraceful mismanagement before. She was to figure in her Turkish trousers in this scene, and she pointed morosely to the omnibuses painted outside the hospital.

"Clear the stage, please!" cried Mr. Quisby. "We'll just run through Miss Vavasour's scenes. Come on, Miss Vavasour—we don't want to be here all day!" He told her this indignantly, as if the delay in lowering the cloth were directly attributable to her. She was the girl who had been suddenly promoted to the leading part.

The manager of the theatre lounged from the

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pit into the stalls, where Rosalind sat now too. He chewed his cigar, and there was gloom on his face. This should have been a week of large receipts, but the outlook was unpromising.

Miss Vavasour was rendered additionally nervous by the fact that she had not had time to learn the lines. She advanced constrainedly, and said in a timid voice—

"'We are alone at last. Oh rapture!'"

"Speak up, my dear!" said Mr. Quisby. "Say it as if you meant it. 'Rapture'! Do a bit of a caper there, be *fetching!*"

"'We are alone at last,'" repeated Miss Vavasour, with a mechanical jump. "'Oh rapture!'"

"Oh rats!" said the manager of the theatre. He turned to Rosalind—"Can she sing?" he asked.

"She sings even better than she acts," said Rosalind innocently.

"Good Lord!" groaned the manager. "Well, what are they waiting for now?"

It was the cue for an embrace, and Miss Vavasour was hanging forward to be clasped in the Tenor's arms, but the Tenor had a request to make.

"Mr. Quisby," he said, disregarding her, "I think it would be better if somebody read my

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part. I don't know how I shall get through to-night as it is—my cold is so severe."

"Oh, my sufferings!" muttered the manager of the theatre. "Now the Tenor's got a cold! This is going to be a great draw, this show is."

"Don't you think you could just walk through the *business,* my boy?" Mr. Quisby asked. "The girl's a bit uneasy in the love scenes—she'll be all over the shop to-night if she don't know what you're going to do."

"I am really very ill," insisted the Tenor feebly; "I'm not fit to rehearse, I ought to be in bed."

"Oh, all right then," answered Mr. Quisby. He beckoned to the prompter. "Here, read the lines—give Miss Vavasour her cues. Do get on, Miss Vavasour, we shall be in the theatre till Doomsday if you don't wake up! 'We are alone at last'—go back, please."

"'We are alone at last. Oh rapture!'" faltered Miss Vavasour for the third time, with the mechanical jump.

"That's marked 'Kiss,'" said the prompter. He was a slovenly man with a dirty face.

"I know it is," snapped Miss Vavasour. "Do let's get to the next line!"

"I was 'elping yer," said the prompter, ag-

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grieved. "If yer don't want no 'elp, sye so!" He read, " 'My Prize! My Pearlikins!' "

" 'Sometimes,' " continued Miss Vavasour, simulating maiden modesty, " 'I wonder if it's all a dream. *Why* do you love me? You might have married Delicia, who has millions—*I* am a very poor girl.' "

"You're a very poor actress too," said Mr. Omee under his breath.

" 'Why do I love yer, sweetheart?' " mumbled the prompter. " 'Your question reminds me of what the apple-blossom said to the moon.' "

"Band cue!" shouted Mr. Quisby. "Have you got that, there in the orchestra?—'The Apple-blossom and the Moon,' song! Go on, Mr.—er—Song over. Get on with the lines."

"Excuse me!" exclaimed the Tenor, reappearing. "That's a cue for the limelight. I don't think it has been marked; I didn't get it at the dress rehearsal."

"Oh yes, it *is* marked," declared the prompter; "*I* marked it." He referred resentfully to the typescript. " 'Moonlight'! There it is, in its proper plice."

"Its proper place is *on me,*" said the Tenor.

"Well, we'll see it's all right to-night," said Mr. Quisby, with impatience. "If you're so ill,

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you had better get home and rest your voice, hadn't you?"

"I should be only too glad to be at home," rejoined the Tenor stiffly. "I just called attention to the matter for the sake of the scene. . . . Interests of the show at heart."

"Where do I speak from now, Mr. Quisby?" murmured Miss Vavasour.

"You're on the balcony, my dear—up left. 'And now ta-ta, my Romeo'! Get on with it, get on!"

"One moment, Miss Vavasour!" put in the Tenor, coming back. "You mustn't speak too soon, there; I expect an encore! Take your cue from me."

She nodded helplessly. "'And now ta-ta, my Romeo.'"

"'"Tis not the nightingale, let's have a lark!'" read the prompter. "'Come out to supper!——

'For thou art as glorious to this night, being o'er my 'ead——'"

"Come to cues!" said Mr. Quisby, stamping.

"'When 'e bestrides the liezy-piecing clouds,
And siles upon the bosom of the air,'"

gabbled the prompter.

"'Bosom of the air'!" bellowed Mr. Quisby.

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"Pick up your cues, Miss Vavasour, for Gawd's sake!"

"I beg your pardon, I didn't hear it, Mr. Quisby," she stammered.

"Well, then, listen, my girl! What do you suppose we're here for? 'Bosom of the air'—caper down centre. Lightly—*lightly!* Great Scot! not like that. You come down like a sack o' coals."

"The girl has no experience," remarked Miss Jinman in a deep undertone to all about her.

"Go back," shouted Mr. Quisby. "'Bosom of the air,' now again! What have you to say as you run down?"

"I forget," she whimpered.

"What's the line, Mr.—er—you?"

"I—I'm just looking to see," said the prompter.

"Looking to see?" yelled Mr. Quisby, furiously, throwing up his arms. "Upon my life and soul it's maddening! What's your business, what are you engaged as, what is it you're supposed to be? *Are* you the prompter, or are you not? Good — —— is it asking too much of a man with the book in his hand to follow the lines? I've got the whole weight of the production on me, I've done the work of twenty men, I'm wearing myself out—and nobody takes the trouble to

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study a part, or to read the scrip! Ladies and gentlemen, the ensanguined rehearsal is dismissed, while the prompter looks for the line!"

"'Supper? Oh, it will be a merry evening!'" read the prompter, sulkily.

"Very well then! Now, Miss Vavasour! let's have it."

"I think it's v-v-very hard on me," said Miss Vavasour, beginning to cry; "I've only had the p-part three days."

"Come, come, do your best! You've nothing to cry about, I've been very patient with you. 'Supper? Oh, it *will* be a merry evening!' Trip down *pretty;* speak as you come!"

"*Very* hard on me," she sobbed; "I think it's m-m-most unfeeling!"

"Bring me a chair!" called Mr. Quisby to no one in particular. "Look here, my girl, I'm going to see you do it if we have to stop on the stage till the doors open. Understand? If I keep you here till the curtain rises, I'll see you do it. 'Bosom of the air'! Now take it up sharp."

"A bit of *all* right, keeping the company 'ere to see a novice taught her business, I *don't* think!" grumbled the low comedian.

Miss Vavasour, still sobbing, drooped to where the balcony was to be imagined. She sniffed

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violently, and, with an effort at sprightly grace, scuttled down the stage again.

" 'Supper? Oh, it *will* be a merry evening!' " she quavered.

"It'll be a merry evening to-morrow—about sixpence in the house!" growled the manager of the theatre. He caught Rosalind's eye. "Are the rest of you as good as this, my dear?" he said bitterly.

"Oh yes," said cheerful Rosalind. "I think you'll like us all!"

Presently Miss Lascelles wanted to see where she was to dress, and with a heartful of memories Rosalind explored with her. The pencilled lists of names on most of the doors were lengthy, but Miss Lascelles was to share a room with no one but Miss Vavasour this week, so she was jubilant, and had been in no hurry to annex a gas-burner. As a rule the ladies scamper on Monday morning to secure the best places.

The room was very comfortably furnished.

"Oh my!" said Miss Lascelles, enraptured.

"Oh dear!" said Lady Darlington, disappointed. "Why, there's a full length mirror! Where's the single washstand for five people? Where's the one chair, broken? Why, you've got two rugs! This is a blow, Tattie!"

Miss Lascelles was doing coon steps before the

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mirror. "Is the rehearsal hateful enough for you?"

"It's a dream of delight," said Rosalind.

But even she was rather tired of it when it finished at five o'clock.

It was nearly half-past five when they reached their lodging, and they were glad to hear from Mrs. Cheney that "the kittle was on the bile." At a quarter to seven Miss Lascelles had to hurry to the theatre again.

Rosalind went later. The wind had risen, and on the pier she had to fight against it. The lamps streaked a heaving sea. The little wooden theatre was fairly full, and a few Christmas trippers in the balcony were comporting themselves with less decorum than prevails in Blithepoint as a rule. Knowing what she knew of affairs behind the curtain, Rosalind heard the whistles with misgiving. She feared that if the whistlers found the entertainment meagre, they were likely to create entertainment for themselves.

However, they listened to the opening chorus with polite attention. It was surprising how attractive many of the chorus ladies had become. They represented the seamen of the Battleship *Deadly Oyster,* and wore sailors' jackets and trousers made of silk—or a material that passed for it. Some of the seamen also wore paste neck-

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laces. They sang that there was "No life so jolly as Jack's," and when one watched their saucy gambols, and remembered that they were actually paid to be there, it looked as if there could be no life so jolly as a chorus girl's.

As it happened, the first to provoke dissatisfaction was the Tenor. He had been refused permission to beg indulgence for his cold, but resolving that the audience should understand that they were not hearing him to advantage, he kept laying his hand on his chest, with an air of suffering. It made him a depressing figure; and when he exclaimed, " 'Beware, my temper's hot!' " a humourist in the balcony cried, "How's your poultice?"

A man in the pit said "Sh!" but several persons giggled, and the humourist was stimulated to further witticisms. Other humourists began to envy him his successes; as the piece proceeded, the interruptions were frequent. Once the low comedian attempted a repartee, but it came too late in the evening to turn the scale; the malcontents had grown spiteful, and as a rejoinder he was hissed. His companions stared at one another haggardly. "Behind," they stood quaking, dreading the cues that would recall them to the stage.

At every exit they came off gasping, "The

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brutes! the pigs! Oh, what a *wicked* house it is!"

The "house" would have been astonished at the emotion displayed, at the "extraordinary sensitiveness of such people." To the Stalls there were "Just a few noisy young fellows upstairs who made jokes." Indeed, to the Stalls, it seemed a long time between the jokes; they wore an air of superior detachment, but they were secretly amused. Only Rosalind understood. Rosalind felt faint.

Miss Lascelles had been accepted by the Balcony while they were still good humoured, and she was among those who escaped contumely; but Miss Jinman's record availed her little. Derisive cheers greeted her every entrance, and a lifetime on the boards could not save her from the sickness of the senses that attacks a player who is being "guyed." As for Miss Vavasour, she trembled as if she had ague when a youth mimicked her high notes in her solo, and on her bloodless face, while she sang, the make-up stood out in patches, like paint on the cheeks of a corpse. At the conclusion of the song she clung hysterically to Tattie Lascelles in the wings.

When the end was reached, the audience rose murmuring that it was a "silly piece," and "not worth going to"—they "shouldn't think it would

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be a success!" No one but Rosalind suspected the despair that was hidden by the curtain.

She made her way to the stage-door. Tedious as the performance had been, a number of young men preceded her, and were assembling to address the chorus ladies when they came out. (Thirty were waiting there that night when the Chorus came out at last.) An old woman, a dresser, was hurrying in with two glasses containing whisky from the refreshment room. One of the young men asked her jauntily if she would take a message for him to "the sixth girl on the right." She said she was in a hurry, and pushed the door open. As the door-keeper wasn't there, to be obstructive, Rosalind followed her inside.

Many of the players were in the flaring passage. They had not begun to doff their costumes yet; they were lingering in groups, a tinselled, nerveless crowd with harassed eyes. Miss Vavasour sat crying on a clothes hamper; Miss Jinman was waiting weakly for her whisky. As it appeared, her gaze fell on the huddled girl; "Here, have half of this, child!" she said gently. The brunette with golden hair exclaimed, "No, no, take yours, Miss Jinman; Queenie can have half of mine!" Everybody kept casting anxious glances in the direction of the stage, where voices could be heard disputing.

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"Poor old Tat!" murmured Rosalind.

Now Miss Lascelles, as we know, had had less than the majority to unhinge her, but so infectious was the atmosphere, so easily swayed are some of these "extraordinarily sensitive" people of the theatre, that as Rosalind's arm was slipped round her waist, she immediately burst into tears, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Cheer up," said Rosalind. "It'll go all right after a few more rehearsals."

"I shall be b-better directly," gulped Miss Lascelles. "D-don't mind me. I'm a fool, but I can't help it; I'm broke up."

"We're all of us broke up," groaned Miss Jinman. "Did you ever see such a house as it was? In all my experience I never saw anything like it! What were they saying as they came out? Do you think we shall go on, my dear?"

"*I* sha'n't be kept, anyhow," wailed Miss Vavasour. "Mr. Quisby's been bullying me as if it was all *my* fault. I shall be out of a shop again. And I did hope I was settled till the spring—I don't know what I shall do, I'm sure!"

"Where is he?" inquired Rosalind.

"That's him, quarrelling with Mr. Omee there," said Miss Lascelles. "Mr. Omee says he won't let the piece go on to-morrow night."

"Not go on?"

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"They say he says so," put in the demi-blonde. "That's all gas—he'll have to shut the theatre; he won't do that."

"If you ask *me,*" said the low comedian, taking part in the conference gloomily, "it puts the kybosh on the tour. We may as well pack up our props, and git. There's no good health for *Miss Kiss-and-Tell* after to-night's show."

"Git?" demanded Miss Jinman. "Git where? I shall have my rights; I've got a contract."

"Take it to your Uncle's!" said the low comedian. "See what he'll lend you on it. If you ask *me,* the Syndicate's a wrong 'un. If we strike it lucky, we'll get our fares; and if we don't strike it lucky, we can travel on our luggage. I see it sticking out a foot."

A shudder ran through the players. They gathered about him dumbly.

"We can all claim a fortnight's salary in lieu of notice," asserted Miss Jinman, rallying. "That's the Law. It's the Rule of the Profession."

The company perked up a little. They turned their eyes to Miss Jinman.

"So I've been led to believe," said the low comedian. "And in such circs the pros always get it, I *don't* think! Claim? Oh, we can claim! We'll all get fat claiming, won't we? You're

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better off to claim from the Post Office than from a Syndicate—at all events you do know where St. Martin's le Grand *is*."

The company collapsed.

"The long and the short of it," he continued, "is that we're out with a stumour of a piece. *Why* didn't it go? Is there anything wrong with *us?* No! a jolly clever crowd, if you ask *me*. The piece has got no stamina"—"stamina" was not the word he used—"that's what's the matter; and that 'Iyde Park Corner cloth settled us. I'll lay anyone 'ere ten to one that the tour dries up, and the Syndicate does a guy. 'Oo's Quisby?"

"Quisby?" they gasped. "'Who's Quisby?'"

"Quisby!" repeated the low comedian emphatically; "I say, 'Oo's Quisby? I'll lay anybody 'ere ten to one that Quisby calls us to-morrow to say he ain't responsible. Now? I wish all Syndicates were in 'ell."

The dispute between the powers had ended, and suddenly the prompter's voice rang through the passage. He bawled, "Everybody on the stige, please! Principals and Chorus are wanted on the stige!"

The eyes met for a moment, and then the players trooped away, with sinking hearts. The

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cold, bare stage was in shadow, for the floats and battens had been extinguished, and the only light was shed by a single burner of the T-piece. By the T-piece Mr. Quisby stood, his back to the dark emptiness of the auditorium. The prompter was still heard calling in the distance:—

"Everybody on the stige, please! Principals and Chorus on the stige!"

Shivering, they flocked there, some in their plumes and spangles, others already in their shabby street clothes; many were in a state of transition—the faces daubed with grease, the undergarments and naked necks revealed by hasty ulsters. Nobody spoke. When the last comer had scrambled to the crowd, all looked at Mr. Quisby. The suspense that held them mute was pitiable.

Outside, the thirty young men had collected to accost the merry chorus girls.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Quisby, "there will be no performance to-morrow." He forced a hearty air. "I'm going to talk to you like a pal. Things look a bit rocky, but we must hope for the best. I won't disguise from you that there may be no tour. Now you all know as much as *I* do—there *may* be no tour. Whether there is or not, I've no doubt we shall all get

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what's due to us. I hope we shall, I'm sure—God knows *I* can't afford to lose what they owe me!" He made a slight pause, to let this sink. "As soon as I hear from London what the Management intends to do, we'll put our heads together again. You worked nobly to-night, nobly—one and all! Some of you ought to be in London, getting your thirty, and forty quid a week! If the thing's a frost, it won't be the fault of the artists, and I mean to let the Management know it!"

"Rats! What Management?" cried the low comedian; "*You* left off being manager all of a sudden?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you're all aware, the Management is a Syndicate," Mr. Quisby proceeded with difficulty. "If this was *my* crowd, I should talk very different. Do you know what I should say if this was my crowd? I should say, 'Between you and I, I'm a bit doubtful of the piece—that's straight!—but I've got a first-class company of artists, and by George I mean to keep 'em!' I should say, 'If I can't pull this piece together, then I'll cast the whole blessed crowd for another!' That's what I should say if *I* was manager. But I'm not. No, I'm one of you. We're all in the same boat. I'm engaged at a salary, like yourselves. Still"

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—he smeared the perspiration round his lying lips—"still, it's always darkest before dawn. There's a silver lining to every cloud, and we may find as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. Mr. Omee won't have the piece, and—er—you're all to clear your props out of the theatre first thing in the morning; but there are plenty of other theatres in the kingdom! We must stick together. Where there's a will, there's a way! We must stick together, like Englishmen in the hour of trouble all the world over, and—er, er—be loyal to the show. Ladies and gentlemen—Boys and girls!—Mr. Omee is waiting to see me in his office. That's all."

"Well, he couldn't have spoken any fairer," many of the poor, wretched women said to one another as they lagged through the forsaken streets.

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CHAPTER XV

INDEED it was Mr. Omee whom the company censured—Mr. Omee who had been inhuman enough to banish a worthless performance from his theatre. "Never," said Miss Jinman, "had she been so grossly insulted—an artist of experience, whose notices as 'Buttercup' had been immense!" Mr. Quisby's position might be ambiguous, Mr. Quisby might be shirking his responsibilities; not to put too fine a point upon it, Mr. Quisby might be a rogue. But he had paid them compliments—and Mr. Omee had shut his doors against them! Mr. Omee was the innocent person whom they execrated and reviled.

In the quarter where the "professional apartments" of Blithepoint are most numerous, the landladies looked anxious in the morning. On every doorstep in Corporation Road, and half way down Alfreton Terrace, the news was known by nine o'clock. The lodgers were obliged to fence with searching questions at breakfast, and many of the houris heating curling-tongs in the

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parlour-fire were told that it would "save trouble if they got in their dinner themselves."

Towards midday the company straggled off the pier with baskets and parcels, and the baggage-man was busy collecting the clothes-hampers. The boards of *Little Miss Kiss-and-Tell* had gone from the turnstiles, and later, bill-stuckers came along and splashed up advertisements of a stop-gap. The rejected comedians stood on the Parade and eyed the work morosely. They had hoped the theatre would have to be closed. Miss Jinman said, "It was very strange, to say the least; she didn't understand how the bills had been printed since last night! It looked to *her* as if Mr. Omee had been *playing them false from the start!*"

Then striking proof of Mr. Omee's perfidy was forthcoming, his brutal nature was revealed to the full—he offered to make the stranded performers, by whom he had lost money, a present of their fares if they liked to return to their homes. "Ah," said the Chorus, *"that* shows what a dirty trick he served us!" "He has exposed his hand *there,"* said Miss Jinman—*"wants to get us out of the town!"*

And Mr. Quisby, who meant to pay them nothing, but was endeavouring to make use of them in Slocombe-on-the-Swamp the following

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week before he decamped, told them there was a reviving prospect of a three months' tour.

So not more than a third of the company profited by Mr. Omee's generosity, and the others warned them that they were being very unwise.

And by this time the tidings of the disaster had spread from Corporation Road and Alfreton Terrace as far as the Grand Hotel, where it provided languid amusement, and the plight of the players was known to all the visitors on the front. Including Conrad.

But it was not until Friday, December 26th, that one of those incidents which may occur to anybody associated him with the matter.

It had been misty since morning, and towards the close of day the fog deepened. When he left a house where he had been lunching with a man, he took the wrong turning. So far as he was able to see at all, he saw that he had blundered into a neighbourhood that was strange to him. A humble neighbourhood, apparently, with nothing of a watering-place about it. This being Boxing-day, the little shops to which he came were shuttered, and owing to the weather, few people were abroad. He wandered amid dim desertion. Then as he paused, hesitating,

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two girls emerged suddenly from the fog, and stopped before him.

"Oh!" exclaimed one of them, "could you tell us where Gandy's the greengrocer's is?"

"I am so sorry," said Conrad. "I can't. Can you direct me to the Parade?"

She answered absurdly that he was "coming away from it," though he was standing still. "It's over there," she said; "you go down there, and take the first on the left, and keep straight on. You can't miss it."

"I *have* missed it," demurred Conrad. "Thank you for rescuing me. I wish I could direct you to Gandy's the greengrocer's in return."

The other girl had not spoken yet, but now she said—

"Oh, never mind, thanks, we shall find it; they say it's quite near. But it's too dark to make out the names."

It was also too dark to make out her features, but her voice was delicious, and if the fog didn't flatter her, she was dowered with the eyes that he most ardently admired. He was all at once sensible of a keen interest in the whereabouts of the greengrocer's.

"That seems to be a shop at the corner; I'll go over and see what it is!" he said promptly.

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But it was a general dealer's, and he came back not displeased.

"Bother! We *must* find it!" cried the first girl.

"May I come and help you?" he asked.

"Oh, you can come if you like," she said; and added as a pure concession to formality, "It's awf'ly kind of you."

So they all proceeded through the fog.

"It's such a nuisance everything being shut to-day," the first girl went on. "That's why we want Gandy's—they say the Gandies live there, and might oblige us. We can ring 'em up."

"Fruit?" he inquired.

"No," she said; "flowers—violets. We want some for the concert to-night. Are you going?"

"Certainly I am," said Conrad. "What concert? I haven't heard about it."

"Oh well, it was only settled this morning. We're giving a concert at the Victoria Hall—The *Little Miss Kiss-and-Tell* company. It's to help us all. Mr. Quisby—our manager—only let me know just now. I'm going to sing a flower-song, and I want some button-holes to throw among the audience; I can't do the song without."

"Throw one to *me*," said Conrad.

"I will," she promised. "We ought to get

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some people in, as it's bank holiday, don't you think so? And if the show 'goes,' we can have the hall again to-morrow. The tickets are only sixpence and a shilling. Did you see us on the pier?"

"No," he said, "I wasn't here then—I was just too late. How many tickets can you let me have?"

"Oh, you'll get them at the door! *we* haven't got any. You'll really come, won't you?"

"I'll come if I miss my dinner to get there," he vowed. "Where *is* Victoria Hall?"

"It's—I don't know the name of the street. It's near the station. Anybody'll tell you. We begin at eight o'clock."

This was all very well, but the Girl of the Voice had not spoken again, and he wished she would say something.

"Shall I hear *you* sing, too?" he asked, looking across at her. He looked across at her just as they approached a lamp-post, and his most sanguine hopes were realised. He found her adorable.

"No, *I* am not in the programme," said Rosalind.

"Here's a policeman!" cried Miss Lascelles. "Can you tell us where Gandy's the green-grocer's is?" she begged again.

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The constable did not know, and, official though useless, took a long time to say so. More intelligently he remarked that it was "Nasty weather for Boxing-day," and Conrad gave him a half-crown. The next instant they deciphered the name of "Gandy" themselves.

"What a stupid policeman!" exclaimed Rosalind, pouting. She pulled the bell, and glanced at Conrad. Conrad happened to be glancing at her. "Your troubles are nearly over," she said with a smile.

"I am not impatient," owned Conrad.

There were descending footsteps, and a woman opened the door.

He said ingratiatingly, "I am sorry to disturb you, but we're trying to get some flowers. Can you let me have some?"

"Flowers?" said the woman. She had a vacant stare.

"A few bunches of violets," Rosalind explained.

"Y-e-s," murmured the woman. She made a long pause. "We 'aven't got no flowers now," she said. "N—no. I'm sorry we can't oblige you."

"Can you tell us where we can get some?" put in Miss Lascelles sharply.

"No——no, I couldn't say, I'm sure," fal-

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tered the woman. . . . "There's Peters opperzite—p'raps *they* might be able to oblige you."

"Do you know where there's a florist's?" questioned Conrad.

"Florist's?" She shook her head. "N—no, I can't say as I do—not one as is likely to be open to-day."

"Let's try Peters'!" they said; and scurried across the road.

Here they pulled without effect; the bell yielded to them immoderately, but no tinkle came. They regarded one another, discouraged.

"You had better leave us to our fate," sighed Rosalind.

"Are you dismissing me?" His tone was reproachful.

"Releasing you," she said, in her best St. James's manner.

"My chains are flowers," said he ornately.

"I wish you'd give 'em to me!" said Tattie Lascelles.

"You shall have all the flowers you want before we part. Ladies, I have an inspiration! You know the way to the Parade—let's go down there and get a fly. Then we've nothing more to do—the responsibility's the flyman's. We'll take

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him by the hour, and make him drive us about Blithepoint till we find a florist's. Is it carried?"

"Unanimously!" cried Rosalind. "Right about face, quick march!"

And there was a belated fly dozing by the pier. When the man had recovered from his astonishment at being hailed, he grew quite brisk, and developed ideas. He suggested "Mitchell's," and drove them to a fashionable florist's in the Mall. Nothing could have been happier. Mr. Mitchell accepted their apologies, and lit the gas as amiably as if bank-holidays were of no importance. Bountifully he brought forward his best for them, and his best was as beauteous as it was expensive.

The warm, perfumed air was agreeable after the fog, and Rosalind among the azaleas was divine. There are few keener pleasures than taking out a nice woman, and spending money on her; and it is unnecessary that one should go out fond of the woman—it's so easy to get fond of her in the process. "Oh no, really!" she protested—and she meant it, for Miss Lascelles was already laden—"No, none for me, really!"

"Just these," pleaded Conrad; "they're so pretty—it's a shame to leave them behind." He put them in her hands.

"I'd like you to see some roses I've got here,

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sir," said the proprietor; "it's not often you can see roses like these."

"Exquisite," assented Conrad. . . . "And just a few roses, won't you?"

"Well, one, then," she said, succumbing.

"We'll have some roses," commanded Conrad magnificently. "And those look nice—those lilies-of-the-valley. You might give us some lilies-of-the-valley, will you?"

"I'll have nothing else," she told him in her first undertone. The woman's first undertone is so sweet.

"A few?" he entreated. "You *ought* to wear lilies-of-the-valley. I wish you were going to sing to-night."

"Do you?"

"I shall see you there, sha'n't I?"

She nodded. "Yes, I shall be in 'front.'"

"I'm so glad I met you!"

He thought of taking them in to the hotel to tea, but her companion's toilette had been very hasty.

The fly was as fragrant as a flower show when they drove away. She buried her fair face in the blossoms he had given to her. It's permissible, but it may stir the man's imagination. It stirred Conrad's; he had rarely wanted a kiss from a woman so much. In the scented dusk,

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as their gaze met, her eyes were luminous—like stars.

The fly rattled into Corporation Road, and he wondered whether she was going to ask him if he would "come in." The fly stopped.

"Au revoir," he said. "Victoria Hall? I have the name right?"

"Won't you come and help us put the flowers in water?" she suggested.

It was of interest to see her without a hat. When she took off her coat he was captivated. He stayed about ten minutes, and the other girl didn't go out of the room. Both went to the door with him when he left.

"Eight o'clock, then?" he said.

"Eight o'clock."

"Whom shall I ask for if I don't see you?"

"'Miss Daintree'; but you're sure to see me."

"You won't be late?"

"No, I shall be there when it begins. Good-bye—and thanks!"

"Oh!—Good-bye."

He saw her smile to him again from the step —and the cab turned.

"What a lark! I say, isn't he mashed on you! Do you like his moustache? Hasn't he got lovely teeth?" exclaimed Tattie in the passage.

"Y-e-s . . . he's rather nice," said Rosalind.

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CHAPTER XVI

EIGHT o'clock had just struck when Conrad arrived at the slum where he was to spend the evening. The exterior of the hall had no sanguine air. Four opaque gas globes glimmered over a narrow entrance, and, in the obscurity, a written appeal affixed by wafers was barely legible. He made it out to be:

"Help the Poor *Kiss-and-Tell* Girls.
Stranded in the Town through No Fault of their Own.
Show your Sympathy by Patronising us."

Behind a portière a disreputable-looking man, wearing a queer overcoat, sat at a small table with tickets. He asked, "Sixpence, or a shilling?" and Conrad said, "A shilling," and the man said, "Front row."

There was a piano on a shallow platform. In lieu of footlights, some pots of ferns had been disposed at wide intervals. There was no curtain; but a screen, behind which giggles were audible, turned a corner of the hall into the most limited of artists' rooms. Those artists who were not making their toilettes, sat quietly among

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the audience. Perhaps two hundred chairs were ranged across the hall, and about fifty of them were occupied. One of them was occupied by Rosalind.

"Good-evening," she said.

"Good-evening," said Conrad. "May I sit down?"

"These are the shilling ones," said she. "Oh, of course, if you *have!* I'm afraid we're leading you into awful extravagance? . . . It isn't very full?"

"No, I'm sorry. I wish I could have sent some people. Have you got another concert to-morrow?"

"They're talking about it—they've got the hall very cheap."

"I might take some tickets, and see what I can do with them. I suppose that would be a good plan, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps," said Rosalind, doubtfully.

"Why 'perhaps'? I thought it was to help you all?"

"Yes," she answered. "Oh, it's meant to."

"There's a reservation in your manner," he said, "that—What's the use of our being such old friends if you don't confide in me?"

"Ah, I didn't think of that," she laughed. "Well, did you see the man with a coat?"

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"I saw him with aversion."

"I thought it would please you! That's the manager, Mr. Quisby."

"Your manager, do you mean?"

"I'm telling you—the manager of the company that came to grief. The girls are supposed to have got this up for themselves; but you may have noticed that you paid your shilling to Mr. Quisby."

"A—ah!" said Conrad. "There seems a weak spot in the business arrangements. Well, what do you propose?"

A youth in a very shabby tweed suit came on to the platform. He sat down at the piano, and rattled the introduction to the well-known music-hall song entitled *My Little Baby Boy.* On bounced the golden-haired brunette. She wore a skirt to the knees, and had made up her face as if for the glare of a theatre. Her appearance lowered the concert to the level of a penny gaff. Several women of the shop-keeping class, hitherto sympathetic, murmured "Oh!" and tightened their mouths.

"Isn't the costume a mistake?" whispered Conrad.

"Do you think so? How would *you* have dressed her?"

"Well," said Conrad, "a long frock."

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"Mm. What sort of frock?"

"Well, I should have made her look quiet, and very—er——"

"Respectable. I know! . . . Go on."

"I should have said, 'Be pale, and pathetic!' "

"That's right, I wanted them to! But they've all got themselves up wrong, except my friend Miss Lascelles. Sh!"

The vocalist's blackened eyelids drooped to the paper that she held:—

" 'Some folks want power and riches, and really will not be denied,
And when they've accomplished their object, they are very far from satisfied;
A fig for your wealth and your power, for riches I care not a jot;
Contented am I—yes! and happy—I'm quite satisfied with my lot.' "

"Inappropriate," said Rosalind under her breath, "isn't it?"

The vocalist looked up again, for now she knew the words:—

" 'I'm not tired of England, I've no wish to roam,
There's a little six-roomed house that's my home, sweet home;
My house is my castle—who is my pride and joy?
Why! his Royal Highness the King of the Castle, my little baby boy.' "

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When she had shrilled the chorus times without number she withdrew, and Conrad said,

"Can't we go and sit further back where we can talk? Look at all those chairs over there."

"If you like. What do you think of her?"

"She can't sing."

"Oh, that's a detail. But she doesn't *work* the song."

"How do you mean?"

"Didn't you feel what she ought to do? Well, of course *you* wouldn't. 'His Royal Highness the King' line ought to bring the house down. Wouldn't *I* make it go!"

"Show me," he begged. "There's nobody looking."

So in the corner that they had found, she hummed the bars, and showed him.

"Oh, aren't you clever!" he exclaimed. "What a pretty voice you have! Perhaps you're—er—fond of babies?"

"If you mean 'have I got any children?' no, I haven't. That was an actress, not a mother. I've no ring on—did you think I was married?"

"Well, you looked so very devoted, I wondered for a moment."

"Are *you?*"

"Suddenly," said Conrad, gazing at her.

" 'Suddenly'—what?"

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"Devoted."

"I meant 'married,' " she explained.

"I?" he said. "Good heavens!"

"Don't be so astonished!—such a thing has happened to men."

"Yes, but I'm not a marrying man."

"Most men say they aren't marrying men till they say, 'Will you marry me?' It's a pity they change their mind so often."

"I have pitied them myself."

"I was thinking of the girls," she said. "A man begins to be in love much sooner than a woman, but he finishes much sooner too."

"Well, that's why marriage was invented," said Conrad. "The man brings the fervour, and the woman brings the faithfulness. You can't combine better qualities."

"Yes, and what about his fervour afterwards? He wants to go and be in love all over again. Haven't I seen? In this profession, travelling about, a girl often meets a good fellow; I don't say he's often rich—the ones who mean well are generally hard up. Perhaps he's a clerk, or something, in the town. He's taken with her from the front, and gets to know her. Then he waits for her at the stage door every evening, and sees her home, and makes her talk 'shop'—he always makes her talk 'shop,' that's the fas-

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cination to him. After she goes away, he writes to her, and by-and-bye perhaps they marry. They do sometimes. Of course she's to leave the stage; he generally asks for that—the kind of man I'm talking about. Well, what's the result?"

"She's sorry she gave it up."

"No, she isn't. There are exceptions—don't I know it!—but in most cases she's only too thankful to give it up. There's no glamour about it for the girl, *she* has lived all that out; the 'little six-roomed house and home sweet home' is the only ambition she has left. It's the man who finds the marriage dull. He was in love with being in love with an actress. He liked waiting for that smile over the footlights—about the middle of the first verse of her solo; it flattered him to know he was the one man in all the audience who was going to talk to her directly. When they're married she's just an ordinary girl—like Miss Smith, and Miss Brown, and the other girls he knew. The fairy has lost her wings. She's a very good little wife perhaps, but just a drab little mortal. He says, 'How romantic it used to be when she was a fairy!'—and goes fairy-catching outside another stage-door."

"Poor little mortal!"

"Men want romances. When you find them

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out, the most unlikely men are romantic; but when you find them out, nine hundred and ninety women in a thousand are domesticated."

"Are *you?*"

"There are the other ten," laughed Rosalind. . . . "And I'm not talking of society women—of course I don't know anything about them; I'm talking of every-day women, and us. Look at my friend! I suppose you'd take her for a bohemian through and through? She has had to earn her living in the profession since she was sixteen, and she's slangy, and she'd shock your sort of woman out of her wits. Marriage is the last thing she thinks of now. But let a man she liked come along! She'd marry him on two pounds a week, and go through fire and water for him, and thank heaven for the joy of hanging up the washing in her own back yard."

Miss Lascelles, with a hint of coon steps, was singing—

> " 'What is the use of loving a girl
> When you know she don't want yer *to?*' "

"I shouldn't have thought it," said Conrad. "She doesn't suggest domesticity in back yards."

"Does she suggest a boarding-school for young ladies?"

His eyebrows asked a question.

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"There was a time when Tattie was among little girls who walked two and two in Kensington."

"Really? Do you know that hurts, rather? I'm sorry."

"*I'm* sorry," sighed Rosalind. "But her heart's sweet," she added; "it's only the bloom that has gone." She smiled. "Clap your hands! She's my pal—you've got to applaud her."

"She's very good," he said, applauding. "I thought she was going to do a flower-song? But I like that one. Isn't it pretty? I like the way it goes."

"Yes, rag-time—all against the beat. *Don't* hum it out of tune!" she said plaintively. "She's going to do the flower song next. By-the-bye, I may have to introduce you to some of the girls. What shall I call you?"

"My *name,*" Conrad answered deferentially, "is 'Warrener.'"

She bent her head: "Thank you," said Lady Darlington.

When the concert was over he walked with her as far as Mrs. Cheney's. Tattie of course was with them. At the foot of the steps Tattie shook hands with him and went indoors, and he remained a minute saying 'good-night' to Rosalind.

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The other girl might well have heard all they said, but the minute had charm to him because the other girl had left them. It implied something. And underneath, to both these shuttlecocks of temperament, there was another charm, not defined yet—to be savoured in the first moments of solitude—the charm of recapturing a mood of years ago. At a doorstep, late: "You look tired?" "Oh, it's nothing." A pause. "I shall see you to-morrow?" "Yes, come in to tea." A whiff of the fragrance of his youth, a touch of the sentimentality of her girlhood, idealised Corporation Road as they parted in the fog.

"I wish it were to-morrow! . . . Good-night."

"Do you? . . . Good-night."

The old tune was not classical, but it was pretty.

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CHAPTER XVII

"I WANT something substantial," said Conrad gravely, shaking his head. "For the follow, say a chateaubriand."

Two days had passed, and in his mind a new and disquieting thought had risen—the thought that Rosalind couldn't pay for enough to eat.

Truly she was paying for a great deal to eat, conjuring steaks and puddings on to the tables of a dozen lodgings, and inventing strange stories to account for her having half-sovereigns to lend. But Conrad could not know that. He only knew that the necessities of the *Kiss-and-Tell* company were more urgent than he had understood; and he felt very sorry for all the girls, but his heart bled for Lady Bountiful.

"A chateaubriand," he repeated firmly. It was nourishing. "And pommes soufflées. . . . No? Well, I'll leave the potatoes to you. With a chestnut purée, eh? And let us have nice sweets. Don't give me the table d'hôte sweets —special! An omelette au Kirsch, with lots of flames, to begin with. What about peaches? . . .

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Well, send for the best fruit you can get—you've plenty of time. Where's the wine-list? A quarter to two. That table in the corner—for three persons."

There is one place in Blithepoint where the chef can cook, though he shirks pommes soufflées. You go downstairs to it—unless you choose the hotel entrance—and it was in the restaurant downstairs that Conrad ordered the luncheon on Monday. He meant to say things at luncheon. But when Rosalind and Tattie arrived, there was a bomb-shell with the hors d'œuvres.

"Mr. Quisby has bolted!" they cried, taking their seats.

"Bolted?" he echoed. "How do you know?"

"Queenie Vavasour and Miss Jinman have been to his rooms this morning. They went to tell him they must have some money. He has gone, he went last night—with our concert sixpences."

"I say!" exclaimed Conrad. He was by this time almost a member of the company. "What are we all going to do?"

"It's a nice fix," continued Rosalind, reproachfully. "I told you this would happen. I never thought he'd be able to take us on anywhere else—never for a moment. Didn't I warn you?"

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"You did," said Conrad. "Oh! I admit it. Will you have a sardine, or——? Miss Lascelles, let me give you some of the pretty ones with the red and yellow."

"I told you all along," repeated Rosalind, "that girls could do nothing for themselves in a matter like that—that it needed a man to take it up. Now, didn't I say so?"

"You said so several times. But you didn't suggest what I should do. I couldn't menace him with a revolver."

"Men are so lazy," she smiled.

"You may smile," said Conrad reprovingly, "but it's very serious for us! We are all out of an engagement."

"Yes," she agreed. "And goodness only knows when you'll get one again!"

"Ah, that's jealousy of my talent! Miss Lascelles, tell her I can't be out of an engagement long."

"With all *his* experience?" cried Tattie. "His notices as 'Buttercup' were immense!"

"Poor Miss Jinman!" sighed Rosalind; "I'm sorry for that old woman." She nodded at Conrad. "You should see her this morning!"

"I want to see her," he declared, "or rather, I want one of you to see her for me. You know

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we've all got to stick together in this thing, and——"

"And 'be loyal to the show'!" said Tattie.

"No, but joking aside, I want you girls to help me straighten things out. I was going to talk to you about it anyhow. Now tell me—what do they all want?"

"I suppose they all want a shop," Tattie answered.

"I can't give them a 'shop'—I'm not in the business—but I might send them home with a few of the Best in their pockets. How would that do?"

They lifted their heads, and looked at him; and the waiter put the soup on the table.

"Did you mean it?" murmured Rosalind, when the waiter had turned his back.

"Well, of course. Now this looks very good; let's enjoy our lunch! We seem to be getting on a bit, so we needn't worry. Don't you think you ought to take your jacket off—you'll be cold when you go out?"

"No, I've loosened it," she said. "But—er—do you know, I'd rather you didn't do that? I —I think they could all manage without."

"Now, why interfere?" said Conrad peevishly. "This is my department. You have bungled hopelessly yourself. By your own show-

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ing you distrusted the man—and you let him escape, instead of patrolling his doorstep. Then, when *I* bring intelligence to bear on the matter and we're all happy, you must cut in and throw cold water on the scheme! Take your soup and be good."

"Isn't it nice?" said Tattie.

"Now that's a sensible remark. I turn to *you* —we won't be interfered with. Suppose you help me, Miss Lascelles? Will you be Santa Claus in Corporation Road for me?"

"Oh," she faltered. "You had better go yourself."

"I?" gasped Conrad; "I wouldn't do it for a million—they'd thank me, some people have got no tact."

"They'd cry over you," she said, with tears in her own voice. "You don't know what it is you're doing. They aren't used to men who —You're a trump!"

"Oh, pickles," he said. "Where's that waiter? I say, we're all being awfully solemn; I thought this was going to be a jolly party? Miss Daintree——"

"Mr. Warrener?"

"Please talk."

"I'm going to talk later on," she said. "I'm going to talk like a mother to you."

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"Won't you talk like yourself in the meanwhile? I don't want anything better."

Then she talked like herself; and the plates were changed, and the hour was pleasurable. It was a very uncommon hour, because her friend was so nice. The pretty girl's friend is nearly always an infliction, and makes mischief afterwards because she hasn't been sufficiently admired. It was such a pleasurable hour that Conrad knew a pang of regret in reflecting that there would be few more like it—Rosalind, no doubt, would flee from Blithepoint as soon as the other women. Would he meet her again? Of course she would drift into another company; meet another man in another town! Damn!

"I'm going to miss that girl," he mused, "and know she's flirting with somebody else while I'm remembering her!"

"'The world,'" he exclaimed, indulging his weakness for quotation, "'is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel!'" And neither Rosalind nor Tattie found it needful to inquire to which category he was assigning himself; there may be sentimental seconds even over a chateaubriand. He added, "Let me fill up that glass for you—you've nothing there but froth."

It was more than half-past three when the waiter abased himself in letting them out, and

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as they turned along the Parade, Tattie recollected that she had "promised to be with Miss Vavasour at four." They all stopped for a minute, and Conrad tried to look as if he didn't want her to go. However, she went, and he and Rosalind sauntered on without her.

"What shall we do?" he said. "Shall we go and hear the band?"

"There isn't one in the afternoon this time of year."

"Not in the band-stand, but I think there is on the pier. The band-stand is retained chiefly as a rendezvous, I believe. When he says 'Where will you meet me this evening?' she always says 'Opposite the band-stand.' "

Rosalind replied, "How do you know?"

"I gather it. Pensive figures watch the clock, and look up and down. They all turn hopefully when they hear you, and scowl at you as you come in sight. I passed once in the evening; I felt myself such a general disappointment that I always walk on the other side now."

The man at the turnstiles told them that the orchestra was playing in the theatre; and as they drew close they heard it, but for some little time they could find no way inside. No charge was made for admission to the theatre in the afternoon, and only the entrance to the balcony was

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open. They saw nobody to guide them. There were no other footsteps on the pier; there was no sound but the plaintive music that they couldn't reach. They wandered round and round the terrace, trying locked doors.

The tide was out, and the sheen of the smooth wet sand was violet under a paling sky. Little white waves were hurrying, and in the faded distance the star of the lightship gleamed and hid.

Through the window of an unexpected office they spied the girl who sold the stall tickets in the evening. "Oh, yes!" she said, and ran out to show them where to go.

Only two or three figures inhabited the roomy balcony. Below, the body of the house was soulless, shrouded in white wrappers. Faint daylight touched the auditorium wanly, but gas jets yellowed the faces of the orchestra. In the narrow line of glare amid the emptiness, they played.

Rosalind and Conrad sat down in the last row, and spoke in low voices. He knew that the impression of the scene was going to linger with him after she had gone.

In a few minutes she whispered, "Let's go on the terrace again," and they crept to the door. "We couldn't talk in there," she said. . . . "Look here! what you were saying to Tattie: I

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want you to tell me straight, I don't know anything about you—can you afford to do all that?"

"Oh yes," he said, "that's all right."

"But really? Tell me the truth. How well off are you?"

"Oh, well! . . . I'm very well off."

"Because if you're going to miss the money, there's another way out, that's why. I shouldn't forgive myself if I put you in a hole; I bar that sort of thing. Lunch and flowers are all very well, but the other's rather steep."

"I sha'n't miss the money."

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright."

"Oh well, then! It's awfully good of you. I sha'n't forget it," she said. "'Warrener' is really your name, isn't it?"

"I thought you understood that at the time."

"Yes," she said, "I did. I only wondered for a moment—I'm sorry."

"Oh, it's nothing," he answered. . . . "You know what I want you to tell me?"

"What?"

"About yourself. What can I do for *you?*"

"Oh, you needn't count me or Tattie. We don't want anything."

"That's all bosh. But you don't come in with the rest—I want to do more than that for you.

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Treat me as a pal. You're on the rocks, and I'm not; I've been there, and I know what it means. Let me give you a hundred to set you right."

"You want to give me a hundred pounds?" She threw back her astonished face at him—she was all white throat and eyes. "D'ye like me so much?"

"Damnably!" said Conrad.

The music had stopped, and now the bandsmen came hurrying past them. They stood looking shoreward, in a pause. On the dusk of the Parade the chain of electric globes quivered into light.

"It's rather rough on you," she murmured. "Isn't it? I've always drawn the line. It's no good."

"I didn't think it was. I shouldn't have told you if you hadn't asked me. I know; if a man cared about you, you'd expect him to want to marry you."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, why not? Only I'm one of the men who aren't designed for husbands. I could make a beautiful lover—while it lasted; a very staunch friend—to a man, or a woman—all my life; but everybody has his limitations. Women are just the same. There are women who are made to

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be daughters—they're perfect as daughters; but they should never marry. There are women who're meant for mothers. *They* should never marry—I mean they make very poor wives. Not many of us are first-class all round. Still, that's nothing to do with it. I haven't asked you for anything, and I'm not going to. If you had been—different, well, for my own sake, I should have been very glad! I never played 'Faust,' though; everybody's morality begins somewhere —it's just my luck that I've got fond of a girl who *isn't* 'different.' But there it is! We needn't talk about it. Put that aside, and let me help you as if I were your brother. I don't feel like your brother, but you can trust me just as much. I quite understand. I'm not vain enough to suppose you like me, but I quite understand that it would be 'no use' if you did."

She looked beyond him pensively, and pensively she hummed:—

> " 'What is the use of loving a girl
> If the girl don't love *you*?
> What is the use of loving a girl
> When you know she don't want yer *to*?' "

"Don't do that," said Conrad. "I'm trying to talk to you like a chum. If you sing that song, I shall kiss you."

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"Well, what do you want me to say?" she asked, strolling on.

"I don't want you to say anything. You'll get the money for the others in the morning, and I'll send you the hundred during the day."

"You're not to!" she exclaimed. "I don't need it, I swear I don't. You're not to send Tattie or me a shilling. If you do, I'll send it back."

"Why?"

"Because I don't need it, that's why."

"No, it isn't. It's because you don't believe what I've said. My dear girl, I don't suppose that after you leave here, I shall ever see you again. When do you go?"

"We go to-morrow."

"You and Tattie? I mean 'Miss Lascelles'?"

"Oh, 'Tattie' doesn't hurt. Yes, she's going to stay—we're going to be together for a little while."

"Where? Don't you want me to ask?"

"London," she said.

"Have you got any people there?"

"No. . . . The only relation that counts is in the country now. Now mind! You're not to send anything for us two, or you'll offend me. Whatever you send will go to the others, all of it."

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"Have it your own way," he said quietly.

They walked once round the terrace without speaking.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

"You've hurt rather. You've pitched it back at me. I don't mean the beastly money, but the intention. I think you might have trusted me. On my honour, I'd have taken no advantage of it!"

After another pause, she said:

"I'm a fool to tell you, but I can't help it. . . . I'm not on the stage any more, I'm not hard up; I'm—married."

"Married?"

"I've been married five years."

"Good Lord!" he said. "Well—Not on the stage? What are you doing here then?"

"I wasn't acting; I only came down to be in it all again. I—" her smile was wistful—"I was 'trying back'; I wanted to feel as I used to feel —I was dull."

He nodded comprehension: "Oh yes! I've done a lot of 'trying back' myself. . . . Do you care for him?"

She gave the faintest shrug.

"I wish you weren't going away," he sighed. "I shall often see you again?"

"We're the only people left on the pier," said

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Rosalind. "Don't you think we're having more than our twopenn'orth?"

"I shall go to town on Wednesday," he told her, as they turned homeward.

"Shall you?"

"You haven't answered what I asked you."

"I don't know. Besides, you'll soon forget that you wanted to."

"If I don't forget?"

"Well—You may write to me."

"Where?"

"I'll post you a line before I leave," she promised. "We shall leave as early as we can—as soon as we've done your business for you; I sha'n't see you before I go. By-the-bye, I don't know if you're staying at the hotel where we lunched?—there'll be letters for you from the company to-morrow, too."

"No, I'm at the Grand," he said. "My Christian name is 'Conrad.'"

It seemed a very short distance to Corporation Road. It seemed untrue that it was only four days since he had stood at the door with her for the first time. They went up the steps, and she did not turn the knob.

"Are you coming in?" she murmured. "I dare say Tattie is back."

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"Do you know I think I'd rather say 'au revoir' to you alone."

"Au revoir," she said. Her hand was formal. He was rather chilled.

"You mean to post me that line?" he questioned.

She nodded. And then in the darkness of the doorway, she laughed, and began to hum the song that he had warned her not to sing.

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CHAPTER XVIII

He found the evening very long. He was restless. The memory of her kiss was exquisite, but it did not make for repose. It seemed to him intolerably stupid that he was boring himself in the billiard-room of the Grand when Corporation Road was so near. Still, she had taken leave of him—if he went he might be unwelcome to her, she might be disappointing to him.

Early next morning he received the line she had promised. It arrived with letters from the company. They were such deeply grateful letters that they hurt him a little when he read them, but he guessed which was hers, and he opened that one first. Mixed with the pleasure with which he opened it there was the curiosity, even the—he would have refused to acknowledge it—even the slight touch of apprehension with which a man who likes a woman better than he knows her always opens her first letter.

He smiled—he heard her speaking.

"If you ever write, the address is 'Miss Tattie Lascelles, c/o Madame Hermiance, 42 bis Great

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Titchfield Street, W.' You understand? You aren't to put *my* name on the outside envelope at all. Blithepoint is blessing you.—R. D."

If he ever wrote, did she say? By his halidom he was going to write immediately! His impulse was to beg her to dine with him, but probably she would find it easier to meet him during the day. Luncheon then. But where? The choice of a restaurant bothered him—she might be afraid of acquaintances seeing her. He bethought himself of the Café Anonyme in Soho, and entreated her to lunch with him on Thursday at two o'clock. As a postscript he scribbled, "You won't say you can't, will you? If I don't hear from you, I shall be waiting for you at the door." To enable her to reply, though he prayed that no reply would come, he added that he should stay at the Carlton.

He was glad to leave Blithepoint; when the woman that one liked there has gone, a place is always distressing. In the train it was agreeable to reflect that she had read his note by this time. Again he imagined her as she read it—looking down, looking up, putting it in her pocket. The little Café Anonyme had been a good idea. They would do their best for him there, and their soles à la Marguéry were unequalled in London. The private rooms, too,

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were not unhomely, they hit the happy medium —there was no riot of red velvet and gilding, nor were there rag roses hanging askew in dusty glass epergnes. It would have been unappreciative —it would have been an insult—to ask Rosalind to be made love to in a vulgar room.

He wandered about the Carlton after dinner until the last post was delivered, and was relieved to find there was nothing for him. He was sure that if she hadn't meant to go, she would have declined at once. She wouldn't raise his hopes only to dash them to the parquetry as the clock was preparing to strike; she wouldn't be thoughtless, unfeeling. Oh no, she wasn't like that!

And there was no letter on Thursday, either, and he sallied to Soho with delight.

The exterior of the Café Anonyme when he reached it looked to him a shade less ingenuous than it had been, but upstairs all was well. The view of the grim houses opposite was screened by lace; firelight flashed on the Dutch hearth cheerfully, and the little white table, set for tête-à-tête, invited confidences. He forced his attention upon the menu, and lounged back into the street. It was what Londoners call a "fine day"; the sky was leaden, and the pavements were muddy, but there was no rain falling. He

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loitered before the restaurant happily, and glanced at his watch. At five minutes to two expectation began to swell.

At two o'clock he couldn't hold back a smile —at any instant now her face might irradiate the blank. He wondered which way she would come, and if she would drive, or walk. He could see for some distance, both to right and left, and his only regret was that he couldn't see both ways at once. He kept turning his head, fearful that he might miss a second's joy.

There was a leaping moment in which a figure suggested her as it hove in sight. The girl proved offensively plain, and he was furious with her as she passed. Somehow he did not rebound from the mistake—it was the first fall in the temperature; the girl had killed his elation. He watched now eagerly, but he repressed no smile.

She was late. Oh, of course she would come, but the fish would be spoilt. Rather stupid of her! There was nothing more irritating than to have a careful luncheon ruined because a woman took twenty minutes to tie her veil. A melancholy church clock boomed the quarter. He began to feel that he was looking a fool, traversing these twelve paving stones. He was annoyed with her—he should be at no pains to conceal it!

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Constantly hansoms rattled into view, with disappointing people in them. There appeared to him discouragement in the gaze of the porter now, and a pair of loafers outside the public-house at the corner were taking interest in him. . . . He supposed she *would* come? Into the tension of his mood there entered the first sick qualm of doubt.

And the church clock boomed again. Hope was breathing its last in him. Annoyance had melted into despair—he longed for her too intensely to be reproachful if she came. He would rejoice over her, he would unbutton her gloves, he would say how pretty her frock was, and that the chef was delighted to have been given more time!

Five-and-twenty minutes to three! . . . Well, he had better see what he had to pay; it was no use hoping any longer. Well, just five minutes!—the last stake. If she weren't here then, she wouldn't come at all; she wouldn't expect him to wait at the door all day. . . . "At the door!"—his heart stopped—the words bore suddenly a new significance. In Blithepoint "at the door" might have meant at the door of her lodgings. Could it be possible she had misunderstood—had she thought he would be on the doorstep in Great Titchfield Street? No! how

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could she? she had told him she was married. But the address was Tattie's—yes, she might have thought so! Good heavens! had *she* been waiting there for *him?* Perspiration broke out on him. What was he to do? Look at the time! —she had given him up long ago, she had gone away! . . . Oh, how could she have thought it? he had named the restaurant! . . . Still, it was very odd she hadn't come. He must find her, he must explain! But—but—but she was a married woman; he couldn't go and peal the bell and ask for her. Wait a moment, what had she said? Was she to stay with Tattie, or was Tattie to stay with her? . . . Anyhow, Tattie *was* there. Yes, he *could* go—he could go there and ask for Tattie! His head was spinning. What the devil had become of all the cabs?

Two minutes later the porter had blown his whistle, and Soho was behind.

The pace was reckless, but to Conrad's fevered stare even the omnibuses seemed to mock his hansom. Alternately he threw bribes and objurgations through the trap. Where was Great Titchfield Street hidden? Were they making a tour of the West End slums? The cab jerked to a stoppage at last, and he leapt out, and hesitated. Nothing but shops confronted him. Had he forgotten the number—wasn't it

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"42 bis"? The next moment he saw the name, painted over the window—"Madame Hermiance, French Laundress."

It was very warm inside. Three girls and a moist, loosely clothed woman, whose opulent bosom was partially concealed, stood at work behind a long table. It fluttered with aerial frills and scraps of pink tissue paper; one of the girls was folding things up, and making them look pretty. He said, "Bonjour, madame," and the woman said, "Good afternoon, sare."

"Miss Lascelles, is she staying here? Is she in?"

"Oh no, sare, she is gone."

"Gone?" ejaculated Conrad.

"She did lodge 'ere," added the laundress; "I let 'er a room upstairs; but she go away—she get an engagement. You mean an actress, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes," he said, "I know all about the engagement, but she came back. She came back the day before yesterday, didn't she?"

"Mais non, monsieur." She shook her head. "She is not come back."

"Damn," he faltered. "Er—but there was a letter sent here for her—it must have been delivered yesterday morning. What has become of the letter?"

"Ah, letters?" She banged an iron about a

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shirt with double cuffs; perturbed as he was, he shuddered to see the havoc she was wreaking. "Mees Lascelles 'as writ me a post carte—she ask if 'er letters come, I send 'em on. I zink she gives up ze theatre, I zink she takes a situation wiz a lady of title. Julie!" she called; "zat letter zat come yesterday for Mees Lascelles, it go to ze post, hein?"

"Sais pas!" called Julie. She sent a button flying off a waistcoat without turning a hair.

"Ameliarran!"

"Yess'm?"

"Ze letter for Mees Lascelles, where ees it?"

"There yer are!" replied "Ameliar Ann." She was sewing a red cotton hieroglyphic into a customer's "tying bow"—near one of the ends. Her nod indicated a shelf piled with packages, and Conrad perceived his letter lying neglected among the washing.

"Ah," said Madame Hermiance. "Alors, I post it to-night myself."

"But this is no trifling matter!" exclaimed Conrad, trembling with rage. "Miss Lascelles may lose a very large salary through this. That's a business letter—from an impresario. It should have been forwarded without delay."

"Tiens!" said Madame Hermiance calmly. "Julie! pack up ze collars."

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He tramped across the shop—and the three girls' heads turned to the left. This much was certain: Rosalind had said that she and Tattie would be together. Sheer babble, that about the situation! If the note reached Tattie at once, there was hope yet. He strode back—and the three girls' heads turned to the right.

"Madame!"

"Monsieur?"

"I must apologise for occupying your time, but——"

"Ça ne fait rien," said the laundress. "Julie! pack up ze shirts."

"But I want you to do me a kindness—I want you to be good enough to send the letter to Miss Lascelles now, by a messenger. I suppose it won't take very long?"

"Mais, monsieur, I 'ave nobody to send."

"Well, but my dear lady——" he said, and talked to her persuasively of paying for the service, and the hansom that was outside.

"Eh bien . . . !" said Madame Hermiance.

Expectancy bubbled in him anew. He would scrawl a line explaining what he had suffered, beseeching Rosalind to meet him still! Would madame have the kindness to provide him with an envelope?

It was provided.

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And a sheet of note-paper? he was abased by the trouble he was causing her.

Alas! her note-paper was not in the shop, but she could offer him a price-list—it was very long, and the back was blank.

This was no moment to finick; the case was urgent. He put his foot on a laundry basket, and the price-list on his knee; and at the back of "Blouses," "Bodices" and "White petticoats from 6d," he pencilled his appeal.

When "Ameliarran" had cast off her apron, he promised her a sovereign to buy feathers. She was given the post-card bearing the address, and he let her depart without a question. It was evident now that Rosalind had withheld her address very deliberately; to ascertain where she lived wouldn't be playing the game! But would the appeal find her at home? She might be shopping, visiting, taking an aimless, fatal walk! Hope tottered in him again. The girls eyed him sympathetically; he was conscious that they placed no credence in his narrative of the impresario, and he withdrew to wait where he would be less interesting.

The street was not picturesque; for the scene of a lover's impatience it might be called "preposterous." The narrow pavements were so busy that he was forced to choose the narrow

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road; and the road was made narrower by stalls of vegetables and tin pots. "Ameliarran," he had heard, might accomplish her mission in half-an-hour. He escaped from the marketing, and lit a cigar in a grey thoroughfare of comparative seclusion.

"Would she be at home?" When he turned back he braced himself to meet the crisis. He had consulted his watch frequently, but he had not returned before "Ameliarran" might be expected. Nevertheless he was too soon. He withdrew again, and fumed once more among the cabbages and pans.

The next time he was not too soon. He found her in the shop, and she had a note for him. From Rosalind, or Tattie? Rosalind! he knew the writing. Let the girls gape! he wasn't going outside to read it among the vegetables. He opened it with elaborate listlessness. She had not protracted his pain while she framed graceful messages. Her response consisted of eight words; but they sufficed:

"Wait at the laundry. Throwing on my hat."

He doubled the girl's sovereign, and drove no bargain with her mistress. But the laundry cooped him now. He closed the door, and loitered gratefully on the step. Yes, indeed, he

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would wait; in the sweetness of relief he was scarcely impatient. A little drizzle was in the air, but he did not heed it. The day, and the morrow, and a hundred days broke into smiles before him. And while he lingered there—on the laundress's step, in the squalid street, under the rain—Conrad suddenly awoke to the exhilaration that sparkled in him, was startled by its freshness. He realised that fizzing in his pulses and his mind was the zest, the buoyancy that he had mourned as dead. It was here, alive! He reviewed with gusto his emotions of the afternoon, the hope, the suspense, the desperation—the quiver of rejoicing. It had been good! he had lived and felt this afternoon; he would not have abated those emotions by a jot! The immoral truth was clear to him, he had made his great discovery—that a man is young as often as he falls in love. That Rosalind had beauty was an irrelevance. Again, to her lover a woman *is* what she makes *him feel.* Whether she is fair or ill-favoured, whether she is worthy or worthless, whether she is formed like Venus, or clasps him in arms as thin as penholders, to him she is supreme, and while he adores her he is Young.

The rain was pattering more smartly, and he waited under his umbrella. Exultation was in

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his heart, her promise was in his pocket, ten years of his age had been shed behind the door. And at this point it may be discreet of us to take leave of Conrad—as Rosalind's cab comes jingling round the corner.

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